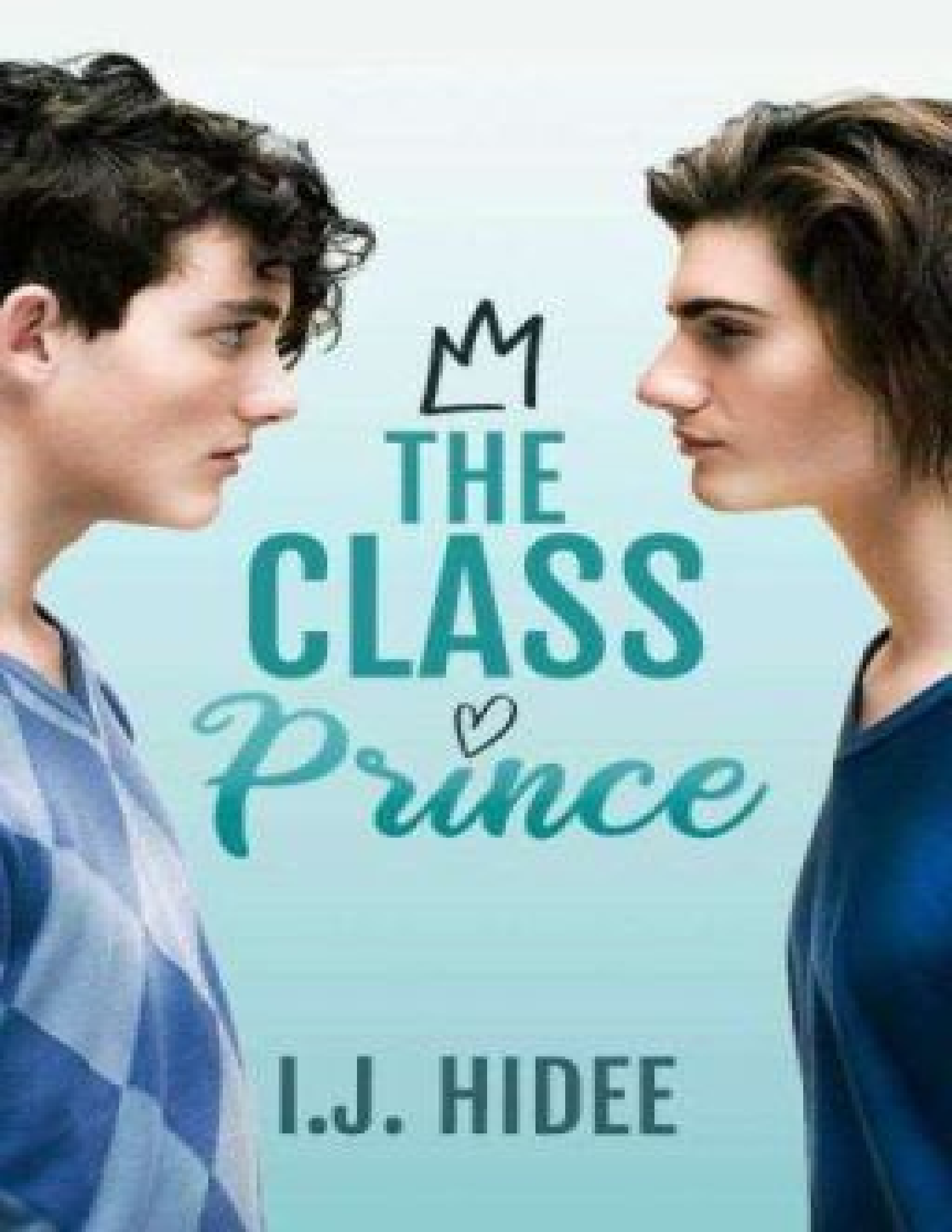




THE
CLASS
Prince

I.J. HIDEЕ

THE CLASS PRINCE

J. I

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CHAPTER 1 ~ I'M NOT GAY

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

I stiffened at the sound of heels echoing outside the office. There was a halt, a brief exchange of words, and then its continuation. When the principal walked in, I straightened my back and watched her settle behind her desk. She opened a cabinet and skimmed her fingers over the files before plucking one out. It was my student record. My name was printed in bold letters on the yellow folder, and my ugly ID picture was stapled on the top right corner. Fortunately, the principal opened the file, and my mugshot was out of sight.

"Desmond Mellow," she read aloud. "Seventeen-years-old, lives with mother, previously attended Junjay High, expelled for behavioral issues and indecent acts, and has now transferred to Ivory All-Boys high school."

She paused, peering at me over her horn-rimmed glasses. "Is that correct?"

"Yes," I answered stiffly.

She went on reading. "Below average grades, doesn't take part in any physical activities, doesn't participate in any clubs, has no instrumental talent and-"

"Mom," I groaned. "Do we have to do this right now? Class is starting soon, and I don't want to be late on my first day."

"We would have gone through this at home if you hadn't sprinted off without me. I told you I'd drive you to school."

"I wanted to take the bus." An obvious lie.

"No, you're still mad at me," she interjected.

I remained silent.

"I know changing schools is hard, but I did this for your own good."

"If you know, then did you make me transfer? I was suspended from my last school, not expelled. I could have gone back after three weeks," I snapped.

"For goodness sake Desmond, don't you remember how you were always getting into fights? Do you even know how worried I was when you came

back home covered in bruises and injuries?" she demanded. "I don't understand why you were acting so rebelliously. What were you trying to achieve with that kind of behavior? What point were you trying to prove? I just don't understand how and why you're so different from-"

I glared at her and she stopped, taking in a deep breath to calm herself down.

"Ivory High has a great reputation. The students here have some of the best academic scores in the country. The boys here are very kind and smart. You'll make new friends soon."

I rolled my eyes.

"Being smart isn't a personality trait. And no offense, Mom, but this place could burn to hell and I'd still sleep like a baby."

"Do you think leaving you in your previous high school would have been any better? That environment and the crowd you hung out with was no good, and you know it. Do you know I worried I was? Your behavior scared me. Ditching classes every week? Going out with your so-called friends to who knows where doing who knows what? Getting into fights and coming home with bruises and injuries? What were you thinking?!"

I clearly wasn't if I was stupid enough to get caught.

"I've had enough of this teenage phase of yours. At least here I'll be able to keep a closer eye on you, and I won't have to worry about getting a call from the principal."

Her joke didn't make me laugh, and I glared at her.

"Would you like me to remind you why you were suspended?" she asked, raising her angular brows and folding her hands together.

"You promised not to bring that up again," I mumbled, feeling my cheeks redden. I was caught in a situation that involved me, a girl, and very few clothes in a classroom. We had forgotten to lock the door, and our English teacher walked in on us, screaming when she found two of her students half-naked on the very desk she corrected our papers on.

She reported us to the principal's office, and word spread quickly around the school. To the students, I was a legend. To the adults, I was a horny boy who couldn't keep it in his pants. My mom was furious when she found out, and my busy dad had to cancel his business trip to Singapore to discuss my "unacceptable behavior" with the school authorities.

My English teacher, a kind Christian lady, had to go through therapy due to the traumatic experience. I wrote her an apology letter, which went

something like:

Dear Mrs. Hilary,

I am sorry that you had to see my bare bum. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive my unholy behavior. God bless you.

Yours Truly,

Desmond Mellow

I was originally supposed to be suspended temporarily but my mom, as she just said, was tired of seeing me get into trouble, thought that it'd be a good idea to send me to my worst nightmare, Ivory High.

"Hopefully this place will help you focus more on your studies and less on girls."

Heat rose to my face at her words and I quickly raked a hand through my dark, brown hair.

"I should go now. I'm going to be late," I said, using whatever excuse I could to get out of here.

"Wait, Des," called my mom, stopping me in my steps. "I want you to be on your best behavior, okay?"

"It depends on your definition of 'best behavior,'" I chuckled half-heartedly. She narrowed her eyes, obviously not appreciating my sense of humor.

"Best behavior as in going to all your classes, handing in your homework on time, no fighting, and no indecent acts in a classroom."

My eyes widened at her last remark.

"Mom!" I hissed. The fact that I blushed at the smallest things wasn't helping either. "They're all boys."

"You know I support the LGBTQA+ community with all my heart, and that I love you for who you are and not who you like," she said, taking a motherly tone. "Just make sure it's done with consent and condoms."

"Mom, I'm not gay," I deadpanned.

"Okay, son."

Another groan escaped my mouth.

"There's no need to be embarrassed," she said in that reassuring voice adults always used. "You did it with a girl in a classroom in your last high school-"

"Exactly! A girl."

"You never know," she insisted.

"I'm not- Never mind," I grumbled, grabbing my bag and leaving her office before she could start teaching me how to use lube.

"Have a great day, sweetie!"

I closed the door behind me before she started teaching me the importance of lube. I walked away from her office before stopping in my steps, banging my head against the lockers in embarrassment. The conversation I had needed to be burnt from my memory, and fast. The bell rang and my eyes widened. Snap, I was late for class!

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CHAPTER 2 ~ THE SLEEPING PRINCE

I pulled out my timetables from my jean pocket. The first class I had was Math in room 112. I took a confident step forward but froze when I realized that I didn't know where room 112 was. I asked a few students and teachers for directions. Either they were new here too, or they had no sense of orientation because they were all giving me different instructions. I probably would have found it quicker if I had just followed my instincts, but I eventually found the classroom. I straightened my shirt and cleared my vocal cords before knocking. A man opened the door for me. The first thing I noticed was that he was bald. His shiny scalp hypnotized me, and I wondered if he waxed it every morning.

Everything about him screamed discipline and order: the rectangular glasses framing his eyes, his pink shirt tucked neatly into his pants, and the blue tie that sat symmetrically on his chest.

"Hi," I said, breaking the silence. "I'm Desmond Mellow, the transfer student."

"Mr. Mellow." He spoke in a tight, snobby voice that reminded me of Severus Snape. "You're late."

"Sorry, I got lost."

"I am sorry."

I blinked blankly. "You're forgiven?"

He raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"For your sentence to be grammatically correct, you must say, 'I am sorry' and not 'sorry'. The personal nominative pronoun 'I' must precede the infinitive form of the verb 'be' in the present simple, before the use of the adjective 'sorry' to form a complete and proper English sentence. Are you a foreigner?"

"Uh, no."

"You sound unsure."

I stiffened. "No, I am not a foreigner."

"Then if you've received a proper education in an English-speaking country, you should know how to construct a proper sentence. Out of respect for your native language and your new teacher, refrain yourself from using such abominable half-finished sentences."

"Okay." I might as well use one-worded sentences instead.

He flicked his wrist. For a second there, I thought he was going to punch me. I was about to raise my fists until I realized that he was just checking his watch. Even unintentionally, he made me feel stupid.

"Apart from your horrendous knowledge of English grammar, are you aware that you are five minutes and sixty-three seconds late?"

"No, I didn't know."

"Wrong."

"Excuse me?" I scoffed.

"That was a trick question. If you were attentive, you would have noticed that sixty-three seconds does not exist in a minute. You were, in fact, six minutes and three seconds late."

And you are, in fact, a royal pain in the ass.

"We do not tolerate tardiness in Ivory High. This is a school of excellence and prestige. I will not accept any student who is a second late in class. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am- Oh, I mean, sir," I said, causing the students behind him to laugh. Before he could scold me, I asked, "May I come in?"

Despite the annoyed look on his face, he stepped aside. I tightened my grip around the strap of my bag and walked past him. I quickly scanned the room and gulped. I must have made quite an impression on my new classmates because they all stared at me with a mixture of astonishment, admiration, and disapproval. There was an empty seat at the back, so I naturally gravitated towards it. I sat down, but as soon as I did, murmurs and gasps filled the room.

Was I not supposed to sit here?

Baldy walked to the front of the classroom and resumed his lesson on the equilibrium of X and Y. I took out a tattered notebook and a chewed-up pencil from my bag. I didn't understand a thing the teacher was saying, but I had to at least pretend like I did. I thoughtlessly scribbled down notes until I noticed that my deskmate wasn't paying attention to class. In fact, he wasn't even awake.

His head laid snugly against his crossed arms, his body steadily rising and falling at each breath. He was facing the other way, but the dense waves of his mahogany hair were enough to catch my attention. He had a nice boyish smell, a hint of fresh pine, and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. He shifted in his seat, and I lowered my gaze to my unreadable notes. I waited a few seconds before glancing at him once more. He was now faced towards me. The sunlight that slanted through the windows kissed his cheeks, illuminating his defined features. He was asleep, so I studied his face. My eyes lingered on his thick brows before descending to his dark lashes that rested over the dark patches beneath his eyes. He had flawless, ivory skin, and a defined jaw, and high cheekbones. The closest word that could describe him and even then, the adjective felt lacking - was beautiful.

His lids cracked open, revealing a storm of grey and blue. My heart fluttered when his gaze met mine, and a playful smirk pulled on his lips as if he had known that I had been staring at him, which caused an all-too-familiar warmth to rise to my face. I looked away, pressing my hand against my cheek to hide my embarrassment. When I glanced at him again, he was asleep.

Chapter 3: The Perfect Prince

As soon as the bell rang, my desk was surrounded by new faces who stared at me as if I was some kind of newly discovered animal on the discovery channel.

"What's your name?" asked one of them.

"Desmond." I smiled, hoping that I didn't sound as awkward as I felt.

"Which high school are you from?" said the one on the left.

"Junjay High," I answered, intimidated by the overwhelming amount of people around me.

They all gasped, sharing glances and exchanging whispers.

"Is it true that you were expelled?"

Was that why they were staring at me like that?

"No, I wasn't expelled." Which, in my defense, wasn't a complete lie. Technically, I was suspended.

"Why did you transfer here?"

Before I could answer, someone else asked:

"Do you play any sports? How about joining our basketball team?"

"You should try out for the volleyball team. It'll look great on your university application!" Exclaimed another.

"I-" I was interrupted again.

"There's also a literature club if you're interested!"

They continued to drown me with questions, interrupting me with more of them, inviting me to join clubs and whatnots.

"Back off hoes," ordered a disembodied voice.

The chattering died down when a tiny figure shouldered his way through the crowd, stopping in front of my table. He had bright blond hair and a toothy smile that called upon two dimples on his cheeks. His emerald eyes sparkled with vivacity. Despite his small frame, he wore an oversized sweater that drooped down his shoulder, which revealed his silky pale skin and prominent collarbone.

"Next class is P.E." He winked. "Follow me."

I got the message he was saving me. I didn't waste a second to gather my things, apologizing to the others before following my savior out the door. When we were out of earshot, I sighed in relief.

"Thanks," I murmured gratefully. He turned towards me and flashed a bright, sunny smile, carrying a warm aura around him.

"No worries," he beamed. He gave out his hand, his sleeves going past the tips of his fingers. "I'm Charlie, by the way, Charlie Wimbrow!"

"Desmond." I nodded with a smile, taking his hand and shaking it.

"Everyone seems to have taken quite the liking to you," he mused.

"It's probably because I'm the new kid, it'll die down sooner or later." I shrugged, but Charlie laughed, shaking his head as if I just made a noob mistake.

"Oh, Desy," he chuckled. Desy? "You're in an all-boys high school. You may be new here, but some of us have been cooped up in this place for years."

I furrowed my brows in confusion. "I uh, I still don't see the problem."

"Well, when you're constantly in a male-only environment, you start to change your preferences, or at least discover your real center of interest, if you know what I mean," he said, wriggling his brows as if it was going to help me understand what he was trying to say.

"Um, no, not really."

"A lot of our classmates thought it was brave of you to talk back to Mr. Power. No one's ever done that before. To be honest, it kind of turned me on too."

I almost choked. "What?"

"I said it turned-"

"I'm not gay," I blurted, self-consciously raking a hand through my hair.

"To quote our king Harry Styles, 'we're all a little bit gay.' Oh, but don't worry, I only date tops."

Tops? What ethnicity was that?

I quickly cleared my voice. "I'm uh, I'm honored that people find me cute, but I personally don't swing that way."

"I can already tell that you're going to be popular here. Not only did you talk back to Mr. Power, but you also sat down beside the Class Prince."

"The Class what?" It seemed as if I had lots to learn about this school.

"The Class Prince," he repeated nonchalantly.

"You mean my desk mate? Is that his name?" I scowled, suddenly feeling bad for him. What kind of cruel parents would give their kid such an unusual name?

"It's a nickname that the students gave him," he explained while adjusting his sweater. "He's a prodigy, a genius if you must. He ranks first in our grade, so everyone here treats him like royalty. Even the teachers give him special treatment."

Was that why Mr. Power said nothing when he was sleeping in class?

"Plus, he looks like a total prince. Not the typical blond-haired Prince Charming, but more like the mysterious and dangerous type."

"You mean the villain?" I snorted, which made Charlie giggle. What's his real name? Because there is no way in hell that I'm going to call him," I paused, trying not to cringe as I croaked, "The Class Prince."

Charlie just laughed, looking at me with his bright, green eyes that had a hint of mystery. "His name real name is Ivan. Ivan Moonrich."

"I see," I mumbled flatly.

The scowl on my face made him laugh. "You don't seem to like him very much."

Charlie leaned closer towards me with a raised brow. "Seems like you're not a big fan?"

"No, it's not that," I quickly said, mentally scolding myself for my transparency. "I mean, it's nothing personal or anything. I just try to steer clear from perfect guys like him."

"Ohhh, how mysterious," he murmured in amusement. He then smiled. "Then again, what's a love story without some angst?"

"Love story?" I choked. "I told you, not-" I'm

"But maybe it's a good thing that you don't want to get involved with him."

"Why?"

Charlie looked straight ahead of him.

"You said that he could be a villain, right? Well, every villain has suffered, and Ivan is no exception."

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Chapter 4: The Boys

The school gym looked like one that belonged to Olympic trainees. My old school could never afford all the material and equipment they had here. Charlie gave me a quick tour before taking me to the main gym room. Yeah, because they had multiple. I pushed open the door, but as soon as I did, a volleyball came flying my way and hit me on the head. I staggered back, falling flat on my butt.

"My bad!" I heard someone yell over the ringing pain that echoed between my ears.

"Ouch," I mumbled, rubbing my face to make sure nothing was broken. When I looked up, a tall boy stood in front of me. He had Hispanic features: tanned olive skin, chestnut hair, and eyes. He wore a jersey that revealed his muscular arms and round shoulders.

"Are you okay?" he asked, crouching in front of me. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

He wriggled his fingers so close to my face my eyes unfocused. I pulled my head back.

"Four," I mumbled.

A smile stretched on his face, and he looked over his shoulder, raising a thumb.

"It's okay, Scott, I didn't kill him!"

Another student who I assumed was Scott-jogged towards us.

"Give him some space, Trevor," Scott said, pulling the first student away from me. The two students argued, and I couldn't help but notice the funny contrast in their features. Scott had fair, satiny skin, and his eyes were a beautiful shade of cerulean. He was lean, while Trevor's body was more toned, but they were both tall and fit. Strangely, their opposite attributes complemented each other. They shared two qualities: they were both tall and handsome.

"I told you to watch your aim. You're supposed to hit the ball across the court, not hit someone in the face," Scott scolded him.

"What can I say? My babies are strong." Trevor grinned, planting a kiss on his biceps.

Scott rolled his eyes and turned towards me. The lines on his face softened, and I felt like I was staring at an angel.

"Sorry about my friend." He smiled sheepishly.

"Best friend," Trevor coughed. Scott ignored him and helped me on my feet.

"You're Desmond, right?"

I nodded.

"Scott," he introduced himself. "The guy making out with his biceps is Trevor. And it seems like you've already met Charlie. You're the transfer student, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes." I smiled shyly.

"Welcome to Ivory High," Scott beamed, picking up the volleyball and tucking it under his arm, looking like a model without even trying to. "If you need any help, I advise you to steer clear from Trevor and come directly to me or Charlie. We'll help you out."

"What do you mean steer clear from Trevor?" his best friend snapped. "I can be just as helpful as you and Cha."

"You don't even know how to tie your shoes," Scott sighed. Trevor stole his volleyball, and they wrestled and fought. I didn't know if they were fooling around or trying to kill each other. We heard someone blow a whistle. A short, chubby man with an unshaven beard walked to the center of the room. He narrowed his eyes at us.

"What are you four ladies standing at the door for? You can gossip about your period cramps after you get changed. Come on, let's go, hustle!"

We quickly moved.

"That's Mr. Harrison, our P.E teacher," Scott whispered.

"Um, he's a little..."

"Sexist?" Charlie completed.

"Misogynistic?" Trevor snorted.

"Rude?" Scott smiled.

"Yeah, those," I chuckled.

"He had a pretty nasty divorce," Scott explained. "But he's sweet to his daughter."

I followed them to the changing room and realized that I didn't bring any gym clothes.

"Here," Trevor said, throwing me a red jersey and a pair of black shorts. "Don't worry, I have an extra pair in my locker. Those came fresh out of the laundry."

"Since when do you do your laundry?" Scott retorted.

"I don't," he laughed. "You do."

Trevor began chatting with the guy next to him, and I noticed Scott's gaze drop to Trevor's ass for a beat too long. His eyes then met mine. Flustered, he looked away.

What was that about?

When we finished changing, we stood in parallel lines in front of Mr. Harrison.

"Alright, I'm going to take a roll call. Every two names that I call will pair up and do warm-ups. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" the class replied in unison. I was the only one offbeat.

"Alicon and Ander?" When he got closer to my letter of the alphabet, I paid attention. "... Lopez and Lunar. Mellow and-" he paused, squinting his eyes and bringing his clipboard to his nose. "Mellow? Why do I have a Mellow?"

He looked up and scanned our faces, stopping at mine. I gulped, straightening my shoulders.

"Are you Marshmellow?"

"It's Mellow, sir."

"Okay, Marshmellow," he said, preferring my new nickname. "Who are you and what are you doing in my gym?"

"I'm the transfer student."

"Your last name rings a bell. Have we met before?"

"No, I don't believe we haven't," I said nervously.

"Well, never mind. Did you play any sports in your old school? You have a lean body. Do you swim?"

"In the summer, yes."

Mr. Harrison rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking about your summer baths with your rubber duckies, boy."

I paused. "Then no, sir."

"Shame, you remind me of an excellent swimmer who used to attend this school. Anyway, you're with-" he trailed his finger down his clipboard, "Moonrich."

My eyes widened, turning towards Ivan who stood on the other side of the line. He didn't seem too pleased either.

"But-"

Everyone snapped their heads towards me. Trevor frantically shook his head at me.

"Did I just hear a 'but?'?" Mr. Harrison glowered.

"Uh..." A bead of sweat trickled down my back. "I was referring to my buttocks, sir."

Mr. Harrison rolled his eyes, and the students stifled their laughter.

"No one cares about your butt problems Marshmellow, now go warm up with Moonrich."

I jumped when he blew his whistle at me and quickly joined Ivan, who was already stretching at the back of the room.

"Hi," I said, trying to strike a conversation. "I don't know if you remember me, but I sat beside you in class this morning."

Ivan ignored me and started doing push-ups. Maybe he wasn't much of a talker? I followed his lead and got on my hands and knees, pushing myself off the ground. I was going to stop on our twentieth he kept going. rep until I noticed that

"Hey, don't you think we've done enough?" I said, trying to keep.

"You can stop if you're tired." It sounded like he was calling me weak.

I twitched, feeling petty and competitive.

"Tired? Oh, I'm just getting started." I smirked.

I was confident until we reached our sixtieth rep. My upper body ached, and my arms wouldn't stop trembling. I eventually gave up and collapsed onto the floor, wincing as the knots in my muscles loosened.

"Fuck, that hurts," I moaned, clutching my stomach. Ivan's eyes flickered toward me, which made me realize how sexual I sounded. It was unintentional, but Ivan seemed amused, and I felt my cheeks turn redder than they already were. Ivan stood up and wiped away the bead of sweat that trickled down his forehead. How could someone look so perfect after working out? How was that humanly possible? He gave me a scornful grin.

"Better luck next time, Marshmellow." He smirked.

My left eye twitched. "Hey, you..."

Mr. Harrison blew his whistle, and my insults were bleep censored. By the time the teacher stopped whistling, Ivan had already joined the others.

Chapter 5: The Phone Call

As the weeks went by, I slowly adapted to my new environment. I became used to walking through the palace-like gates, seeing the ridiculously expensive cars in the parking lot, and greeting snobby but undeniably knowledgeable teachers. I even got used to being around boys and nothing but boys. What made the change easier was my lack of nostalgia for my old school friends. I missed ditching classes and going to the arcade with them, but coming here made me realize that we were never that close. They were people I hung out with because we had common interests, but nothing deepened our bond. They texted to ask if I was okay and how my new school was, but the casual "Hey, what's up?" messages stopped coming. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm going to die alone," I stated to myself. I imagined myself seventy years from now, wrinkly, old, and cranky, waving my cane around and complaining about global warming. I got up from my bed and busied my mind with homework. I grabbed a textbook but immediately lost all motivation to study as soon as I opened it.

Great, I'm going to die alone and stupid.

"Desmond, there's someone on the phone who wants to talk to you!" my mom called.

"Is it dad?" I asked, unable to contain my excitement. I joined her downstairs, and she handed me the phone.

"Hello?" I said eagerly.

"Desmond!" I recognized the voice right away.

"Arthur?" I smiled, happy to hear my older brother's voice, but felt guilty for being slightly disappointed that it wasn't Dad. "How's life at Harvard?"

"I'm surviving on six cups of coffee to finish assignments. Life here is amazing," he chuckled sarcastically.

"You're only drinking coffee, right?" I asked slowly. After Arthur graduated, he developed a heavy drinking problem. It got so bad that he had to see a doctor at one point, but he was getting better. My parents rarely brought up the topic. I once overheard my aunt say that it was because of a

bad breakup right after his graduation. My uncles told me it was normal for a brilliant boy like him to develop bad habits, and that all geniuses needed their own escape from reality. But no one really knew what happened. I doubted that it was because of a girl. He had so much in life going for him. What was there to be sad about?

"I'm three weeks clean," he said.

"That's great." I smiled, feeling relieved.

"Anyway, the campus is amazing and..."

I listened as he told me anecdotes about new his life at one of the most prestigious universities in the world. I was happy for him; he was living his dream life.

"Wow," I murmured once he finished telling me about that time he almost blew up a laboratory. "That's so cool."

"Enough about me. What about you? How's Ivory High? Is Mr. Power still bald?"

"Bald as a baby's butt," I confirmed, which made him laugh.

"And Mr. Harrison?"

"Still not over his divorce."

"Hearing about them makes me nostalgic," he chuckled. "I was happy when mom and dad said that you were transferring to my old high school."

Arthur graduated from Ivory High three years ago. They accepted him to Harvard University with a scholarship, majoring in science and advanced technology. He was gifted, talented, and ambitious. Like everyone else, I admired him.

"Against my own will," I clarified, craning my neck to see if my mom was listening. I lowered my voice just in case. "Mom gave me a lecture about condoms on my first day."

Arthur burst into laughter.

"How did that happen?"

I told him about my first day of school and my life at Ivory High. Despite our differences, I've never hated my brother. It wasn't his fault for being gifted, just like it wasn't my fault for being average.

"Did you make any new friends?"

I smiled. "I've made three."

"Tell me about them."

"The first friend I made is Charlie. He's bubbly and bright, and you can talk to him about almost anything. Then there's Trevor, the one who

accidentally hit me with a volleyball. He's the goofy one in the group. He can be dense sometimes, but you should see him solve math equations. I'm also friends with his childhood best friend, Scott. He's more reserved, but he's nice and caring and has this motherly vibe. He always helps me with schoolwork. Oh, and he keeps Trevor out of trouble."

"I'm glad you've found a group of friends. You were always better at making friends than I was." Arthur sounded impressed.

"That's not true, everyone loves you."

"They love my achievements," he clarified. "Besides, I don't have your sass."

"No one does."

We both laughed.

"You haven't gotten into any recently, have you?" trouble

My brother worried about me, even more after moving away for his studies. I knew he felt guilty leaving the house especially since Dad was absent most of the time.

"No, not yet, but there's someone that gets on my nerves."

Since day one, the Cursed Prince and I haven't gotten along. The worst part was that I had to sit beside him for most of my classes since the seat next to his was usually the only one that was empty.

"What's his name?"

"Didn't bother remembering it," I snorted.

"Why does he get on your nerves?"

"Because he's a narcissistic ass-hat who thinks he's better than the rest of us because he ranks first in our grade. He acts like a prince and expects us to treat him like royalty, and the worst part is that he gets special treatment. He sleeps in class, and the teachers don't care, but I get scolded just for glancing out the window. Scandalous, I know!"

"Sounds like you like him," Arthur mused.

"Arthur, you're supposed to be the smart one. I'm telling you I hate him."

"People only say that about people they like."

I flinched.

"Have you talked to him?" he asked.

"And waste my breath? No, thank you."

"Well, at least you aren't ditching classes anymore." He paused. "You aren't ditching classes, are you? No fighting either, right?"

"No, there's no one to ditch or fight with."

"You're not a delinquent, Des."

"Tell that to mom and dad."

"They know that you're not a bad kid. I never believed that the way you behaved in your old school was you. Ditching classes and causing trouble, you were only doing that to prove-"

My chest tightened, and my defense mechanism kicked in: Avoid sappy conversations where I was emotionally vulnerable.

"Oh, hey, Arthur, you're breaking up, krrrk, krrr," I started making fake noises. The conversation was taking a bad turn, and I needed to abort ASAP. "I krrr, can't hear- crackle shackle mc'cackle- gotta go. Bye!"

"Wait, Desmond has someone-"

I hung up. The kitchen fell silent. Has someone what? What was he going to say? Never mind, I'll ask him the next time he calls. Christmas, maybe. He said that he'd come back for the winter holidays.

"So, how's Arthur doing?" Mom asked with a wide smile, the edge of her voice rubbing me the wrong way. "Doing well at Harvard, I suppose?"

I gave her a thumbs up. "He's doing amazing, as always."

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Chapter 6: Arthur's Shadow

As much as I liked my new group of friends, life at Ivory High was hard and stressful, living up to its reputation as one of the most prestigious schools in the country. Even if I could better my behavioral issues, I couldn't fix my grades. At least, not immediately. I was always against the idea that grades defined a person's value, but it was hard to rebel against a system that brainwashed us to think otherwise.

Teachers wrote what looked like gibberish on the board, but no one dared to ask questions when they didn't understand including me - because nobody wanted to be that kid who slowed everyone down. I had too many essays, too much homework, too many projects, and not enough time. Oh, and don't get me started with the weekly tests that we had to do in an unrealistic amount of time. Our most recent one was: 'List down all the Spanish kings during the Golden Age, their date of birth and death, and explain why the Spanish Empire declined through time. You have 30 minutes'

How did they expect us to answer that? I couldn't even remember what I ate last night!

"Everyone who didn't get the average grade, please come to my office after class," said Mr.

Power, who began handing out last week's test paper.

Another problem was that teachers often did everything in alphabetical order, and it didn't help my ego that they often linked me with the smartest boy in our grade. I've been in Ivory High for a month, and the only time I have ever seen Ivan pick up a pen was during quizzes and tests.

Regardless, he'd ace them.

I watched as Mr. Power zigzagged around the room, mumbling, 'good', 'maybe next time',

'decent'. My heart raced each time he walked past me. I tried to wipe the sweat off my clammy hands against my jeans, but the friction only made it worse. Mr. Power stopped at my desk and slid me my paper, narrowing his eyes at me with that look of disdain.

"I'll see you after class, Desmond."

I flinched when I saw my grade. 3/100. It felt like a punch to the gut.

Mr. Power turned towards Ivan, and his face brightened immediately.

"Ah, Mr. Moonrich! Brilliant work, absolutely marvelous! The delicate choice of words brought out the eloquence of your arguments. It was a pleasure reading your paper, bravo, bravo."

I craned my neck to peek at his grade. A 100/100 was circled in bright red. Ivan caught me glancing and lowered his gaze to see my grade in return. Flustered, I flipped it over, but it was too late. He had already seen it.

"Pfft," he snorted, not even trying to hide the

fatuous superiority in his gaze. And then he returned to his usual sleeping position, resting his head on his arms without a care in the world.

I sat there with parted lips.

Did... Did he just laugh at me?

My jaw tightened. A mix of embarrassment, humiliation, and my own disappointment made me see red.

"Hey, Desy, did you pass?" Charlie whispered, before I could shove Ivan off his chair.

"The teacher gave me three points for writing my name correctly," I mumbled.

"I didn't pass either," he said, showing me his 48/100. "We can go to the teacher's office together."

I rested my forehead against my desk, trying not to cry.

"Desmond Melow, no sleeping in class," Mr. Power snapped. My head shot up, and I angrily gestured towards Ivan who was literally sleeping beside me, but Mr. Power turned a blind eye and continued distributing, the rest of the papers.

"Desmond, Charlie, do you know that you two are the only students who failed this test?" asked Mr. Power, folding his arms over his chest.

"Well, now we do," I mumbled under my breath.

Both of us had our heads hung down, shuffling our feet in embarrassment. He turned towards Charlie.

"Charlie, I know that you aren't the smartest student in the class, but you normally get above average grades. What happened?"

Charlie fiddled with his sleeves.

"I've been under a lot of stress and didn't have time to study," he explained quietly.

"What kind of stress?"

"Just small problems at home."

"If they're 'just small problems', then you should be able to handle them. Stress isn't a valid excuse to fail school. Do you think any of our top universities will pick someone who crumbles under stress? Results like these are unacceptable, figuratively and literally. Now, don't cry, you put this upon yourself."

There wasn't a trace of remorse on his face.

"This grade is unacceptable. Do you hear me, Charlie?" repeated Mr. Power, pointing his finger at him. I wanted to slap it away but tightened my fists and forced myself to remain calm, remembering what my mom told me.

No fighting, no fighting, no fighting...

"I understand," Charlie sniffled, quickly wiping away his tears.

Mr. Power continued to scold Charlie, whose eyes watered again. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Mr. Power," I interrupted him. "I'm the one who got a three."

Excitement glimmered in Mr. Power's eyes, and I knew that he was more than happy to berate me. I didn't mind. I had directed his attention away from Charlie. Charlie frowned when Mr.

Power shot fires, but I discreetly tapped his shoe with mine to tell him it was okay.

"Yes, I am aware," he grumbled, finally turning towards me. "Remind me, which school were you originally from?"

"Junjay high."

He raised his brows. "No wonder."

I twitched but bit my tongue, remembering how I wasn't supposed to talk back to the teachers and on my "best behavior." My old school didn't have the best reputation and was located in the shady part of town, known to be the place where all the delinquents and future drug dealers went to.

I could have gone to a better high school since my grades in middle school were rather good, but I purposely chose to go to Junjay high.

But it came with its consequences. I caught on bad habits which included sleeping in class and ditching most of them. It probably explained why I

was so behind compared to the rest of my classmates, apart from the fact that the majority of them were born prodigies.

"Mr. Mellow, did you even study for this test?"

"I did," I answered monotonously.

"Then try studying harder."

"I am trying. That's all I've been doing! Trying!" is what I wanted to scream at him.

"I'll do better the next time." I apologized half-heartedly, but he didn't look convinced.

"I know that transferring to a new school isn't easy, but that isn't an excuse for you to get bad grades."

"I... I know."

"If you keep this up, then I'll have no other choice but to report you to the principal," he said grimly. My body stiffened, pursing my lips at the thought of being scolded by the principal, aka, my mom.

"This is what we're going to do," he said to both Charlie and me. "I'm going to assign two students to help you study. You'll retake the test with different questions, but I don't want to see such humiliating grades from my students ever again. Is that clear?" he instructed in a commanding voice.

"Xander Aldrick from class B has already offered to tutor me if I ever failed a test," Charlie said.

"Ah, Mr. Aldrick? I believe he comes second after Moonrich in the rankings, a brilliant student indeed," he grunted in approval. "Then I'll leave you in his hands, but I'm expecting greater things from you Charlie. I really am."

"I won't disappoint you again."

"You may return to class now."

We both turned to leave, but Mr. Power called my name.

"Desmond, you stay here," he said, making me flinch. Charlie glanced towards me with a frown but I just gave him a small nod and smile. He hesitated at first but quickly scurried out of the office.

I turned towards the teacher, straightening my back and putting my hands behind my back like a soldier.

"Sir?" I said in a dry voice.

"Desmond, correct me if I'm wrong, but do you perhaps have an older brother who used to attend this school?" he asked. My body stiffened.

My stomach twisted into knots.

"Arthur Mellow," he said when I didn't reply. I nodded stiffly, and a smile grew on his face. Mr. Power never smiled.

"I knew that there was something about your last name that rung a bell!" He exclaimed excitedly. "Ah, Arthur

Mellow how could I forgot such an amazing student?!" He murmured in awe. "How is he doing? Good, I suppose?"

"We don't live together anymore. He moved out after he got a scholarship at Harvard," I mumbled flatly.

"As expected! I knew that he would achieve great things!"

He opened the drawer, and I felt a stinging pain when he took out a handful of old exam papers that had familiar handwriting.

"Arthur let me keep these as correction examples for my students, I still use them to this day," he explained, even though I never asked. He stared at the papers in complete admiration, shaking his head in disbelief. "Perfect student, perfect grades, president of the student council, and captain of the swimming team. Mr. Harrison adored him; your brother won so many trophies for our school. And my, oh my, was he quite the looker."

I didn't answer, eyes glued to the floor while my teacher continued to praise Arthur, talking about him as if he were his son. But he suddenly stopped, looking at me with a change of expression. The proud smile disappeared, replaced with a frown stapled at the corner of his lips. His gaze one that I was way too familiar with showed disappointment and - dissatisfaction.

"Desmond, can't you be a little bit more like your older brother?" He asked, making my body stiffen. It wasn't as if I haven't heard these words before, it was just that I could never fully get used to hearing them. "Us teachers aren't expecting perfect grades, but we still expect a minimum of effort. And when I say minimum, I mean at least a C+," he said, rubbing his wrinkled forehead. "I don't understand how you can be so different to your brother."

Hm, I dunno, let me think... Maybe, just maybe, it was because we were two completely different people?!

"I understand that you're disappointed sir, but I don't think that it's necessary for you to compare me to my brother," I spoke in an icy, cold tone.

He evinced his disappointment with an involuntary sigh.

"Of course I don't expect you to exceed your brother seeing your grades, it's probably impossible, but..."

He continued to lecture me but my mind eventually switched off. I stopped listening to what he was saying, occasionally nodding every now and then.

This was exactly why I wanted to avoid coming to this school. I was happy in my old high school, an isolated area where no one knew of Arthur's existence or simply didn't care. A place where I didn't have to be shadowed by his achievements, where I wasn't constantly being compared to him, where people saw me for who I was and not the little brother of the perfect, flawless genius who got into Harvard.

After 15 minutes of Mr. Power admiring Arthur and 15 minutes of telling me how worthless I was (in the most adult and polite way possible of course), he finally let me leave. Oh, but not before giving me some of my brother's old exam papers so that I could admire and worship them.

I left the office.

Once I closed the door behind me, I could feel tears suddenly fill up my eyes. I gritted my teeth, walking down the halls with my head tilted back to prevent them from escaping, taking in slow breaths to calm myself down. But the heavy feeling in my chest just wouldn't go away.

Tears pricked my eyes, so I tilted my head back to stop them from running down my face.

Don't cry, Desmond, don't you dare cry.

But telling myself not to cry only made it worse. I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings, and when I turned around the corner, I bumped into something hard. I lost my balance and fell on my bum, dropping all of Arthur's papers that scattered around me. I looked up, my eyes widening. I didn't bump into something, but someone.

And that someone was Ivan Moonrich, the Class Bitch.

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Chapter 7: Twat-faced Bimbo

I opened my mouth to apologize, but Ivan cut me off.

"Watch where you're going," he sneered. My brows furrowed at the rude tone of his voice stained with disdain, feeling a rush of anger arise inside my chest. I gritted my teeth.

Deep breaths, Desmond, deep breaths. You promised mom that you wouldn't fight anymore, remember?

"Excuse me?" I scoffed.

"Are you deaf?"

"No, but I have an ear disease that makes it hard for me to hear bullshit."

His thick brows narrowed, and I felt myself shrink under his shadow. Why did he have to be so darn tall? And why did he look good even from this angle? Where was his double chin?

I knew deep down that it was my fault for bumping into him, but his foul mouth and haughty attitude was making it hard for my already big enough ego to choke out an apology.

He leaned in towards me, narrowing his eyes.

"The hell are you crying for?"

"Your face."

I ignored the surprised look on his face and crouched down, gathering Arthur's papers.

I could see every mark that was circled in bright red.

100/100, 100/100, 100/100, 100/100. Oh look, another 100/100.

Ivan bent down and picked one up.

"Arthur Mellow?" His voice softened. He glanced towards me. "Your name isn't Arthur."

"Thank you for that very sharp remark," I retorted.

"Why do papers?" you have someone else's

"Why do you care?"

"I asked you a question," he growled in a husky voice.

"And so did I."

"Why do you have his papers?" he repeated in a more demanding tone.

"Mr. Power gave them to me," I sighed, finally standing back up and snatching the one that he held in his hands.

"Why would he give these to you?"

"That's none of your business, now is it?" I smirked. I was about to leave, but he grabbed me by the arm and slammed me against the wall, slamming his hand only inches away from my face, leaning dangerously close to me. His grey eyes were clouded with frustration and anger, making me gulp.

"Don't make me repeat myself," he hissed through his teeth, his voice almost coming out as a growl. "Why did Mr. Power give you Arthur's old exam papers?"

The Class Prince, Ivan Moonbitch. I didn't give a shit. I had my limits, and he had just crossed the line.

I pushed him away, surprised by how hard his chest felt but pretended not to be impressed, straightening my back so that I wouldn't seem so short.

"Well, Ivan, why don't you try using that genius brain of yours and look at his last name? Arthur and I have the same last name, do you not see it written all over his papers, you good for nothing twat faced, bimbo?! Are you blind or something? Do you not know how to read?" I snapped, my voice involuntarily rising. "Well then, let me help you out a bit. He's my brother, my older brother. My B-R-O-T-H-E-R, BROTHER," I shouted, releasing all my anger. "Now will you back the fuck off and give me some personal space? Breathing the same air as you is suffocating enough, so do me a favor and just back. The. Fuck. Away."

His brows furrowed and he had a surprised, yet, a somewhat amused look on his face. I realized that I just yelled at him and I think that I might have called him a bimbo somewhere in between, but I was so fired up that I was just blurting the first thing that came to mind.

I quickly stormed away, locking myself in the boy's bathroom to finally catch my breath. I could still feel the adrenaline course through my body as I paced back and forth, my heart beating quicker than it was supposed to. But something was telling me that it wasn't because I was scared or because I just ran down the halls.

No, it was a different feeling.

Just what could it be?

I found refuge in the boys' bathroom and locked myself in a stall. I pressed my back against the door, something I wouldn't have done if it were any other public bathroom, but this was Ivory High. There were no swear

words on the walls, no hairy dicks drawn anywhere, not even a single fake number in sight. Everything was squeaky clean. Everything always had to be perfect.

I crouched down and took in a shaky breath, looking at Arthur's papers that crumpled in my grip. Even when Arthur wasn't here, even when he didn't try, he caught everyone's attention. Even Ivan Moonrich, the acclaimed Class Prince, my desk mate, the boy who sat beside me almost every day, but who wouldn't even spare me a glance, seemed infatuated by him. Arthur was better than me in every way. He always has.

School ended and I was walking back home with my friends, Charlie, Trevor and Scott. They were joking around and chatting, but I half-heartedly listened to their conversations, my mind and thoughts completely elsewhere.

I kind of felt bad for directing all my anger on Ivan, but at the same time, I was happy that I did. Someone needed to show him that he couldn't just act rude and push people around just because he was "perfect" or because he was idolized by the other students. In fact, he wasn't perfect at all. I could already list down a number of flaws!

"You've been quiet ever since you came back from the teacher's office. Was it really that bad?" asked Scott, giving me a small nudge.

"Hm?" I mumbled, snapping out of my thoughts. Scott frowned and I let out a quick laugh. "Oh, yeah, no, it wasn't that bad," I lied.

"Speaking of which, the Class Prince didn't seem to be in a good mood either," noted Trevor. "I wonder what pissed him off."

"Or who pissed him off," said Charlie. "Say, didn't he come back to the classroom right after Desy?"

The three of them simultaneously turned their heads towards me and I quickly averted my eyes to the side.

"Nothing happened," I mumbled dryly, but my face and ears betrayed me, glowing bright red at my big fat lie.

"Something definitely happened," gasped Trevor.

"Maybe he missed the urinal hole when he went to take a piss, I don't know," I grumbled hoarsely, feeling my face turn even brighter.

"Leave him alone, Trev," sighed Scott, coming to my rescue. Trevor rolled his eyes and grabbed his best friend by the shoulder, giving him a

noogie.

"Leave him alone, Trev," he mimicked.

"Ow, hey, watch the hair!" hissed Scott as they both started to playfully wrestle.

They wrestled and almost got run over by a car. The car that sped past us started honking angrily, and Charlie and I pulled them back to the sidewalk. Trevor burst into laughter while Scott scolded him for not paying attention.

"Oh, come on, we all need a near-death experience to live." Trevor smiled.

"Guys, stop fighting," frowned Charlie, trying to separate them. But instead of breaking them apart, he got stuck in-between their fight and started to cry for help as his small figure was trapped between two giants who continued to wrestle.

"DESY, HELP ME! I CAN'T BREATHE!" he shrieked.

I let out an exasperated sigh, yanking Trevor off of Scott and freeing poor little Charlie who waddled towards me, hugging my arm and murmuring in a dazed voice. "Never again."

I patted his head.

"So are you going to tell us what happened?" asked Trevor, straightening his wrinkled shirt.

"You're not going to stop asking until I tell you, are you?"

"Nope!" he said with a cheeky smile.

Not having much of a choice, I ended up telling the three of them what happened in the halls and they all stared at me with wide eyes. Of course, I didn't mention what happened in the office or anything about Arthur.

"You called the Class Prince a twat-faced bimbo?" Trevor wheezed. "No wonder he looked so pissed! No one's ever disrespected him like that, not behind his back, and definitely not to his face."

He put his firm hand on my shoulder and gave me a solitary nod. "You, sir, have earned my highest level of respect."

I rolled my eyes, shrugging his hand off.

"He probably hates me." Not that I cared or anything.

"Well, at least he didn't hurt you," he chuckled.

"Hurt me?" I scoffed. As if that privileged, rich kid could actually throw a punch.

"Oh, you didn't know?" asked Scott. I slowly furrowed my brows.

"Know what?"

"Ivan is a boxing prodigy. He's just as good as a professional boxer," he smiled. "He could've knocked you out clean."

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Chapter 8: The Old School Bully

My friends and I parted ways. Trevor and Scott went down the same road since they lived next to each other, and Charlie had to go to his part-time job. I headed to a bookstore to buy the books required by my literature teacher. I'd usually read the summaries online since it was an easier and quicker process than flipping through an entire three hundred page book (oh, don't act as if you've never done it), but the teachers at Ivory High were more diligent than my previous ones. They asked specific questions that you could only answer by actually reading the book.

I bought everything on my list and spent some time wandering in the comic and fantasy section before going home. The sun was setting, and it got cold. I dug my chin into my jacket as the autumn wind brushed over my cheeks. I continued to walk down the block that led to my street, but stopped when the pedestrian sign turned red. Loud music and laughter from across the road caught my attention. A group of boys were drinking and smoking, disturbing by-passers with music blasting through their Bluetooth speaker.

My eyes widened when I saw a familiar face amongst them. He had dyed his hair bright red and had styled it into a fierce mohawk. His left eyebrow had two slits, decorated with ornaments of piercings. The distinct scar across the bridge of his nose — the one I had left him during one of our fights was how I recognized him. Rick was an old classmate, but they expelled him for vandalizing school property.

The pedestrian sign turned green, and I lowered my eyes, digging my chin deeper into my jacket in hopes to remain undetected. I turned around the block, sighing in relief when I was out of their sight, but my body stiffened when I heard someone call my name.

"Desmond!" Rick shouted again. Panic coursed through my body, but I ignored him, quickening my pace.

Remember Desmond, you promised Mom you would stop fighting. How many of them are on my trail?

When I turned around the next building, I glanced behind me and counted.

1, 2, 3...6 of them?!

I didn't want to bring trouble to my house, so I ditched my usual path home and walked down an unfamiliar street, scurrying past opening bars and convenience stores to get them off my trail. I found myself in a dark alley where the city lights barely reached. I turned around the corner but froze in my steps. It was a dead end. I turned around, but Rick and his gang were already walking towards me, blocking the only way out. They trapped me like a rat in a cage. I knew I had shitty luck, but this was really pushing it.

"Desmond!" Rick exclaimed with a crooked grin. He had a strange walk and his shoulders hunched like a cat ready to pounce on its prey. "I've been calling your name for the past ten minutes. I thought I had the wrong guy."

I glared at the malicious smile slithering up the corners of his wry lips.

"Oh," was all I answered.

"Oh?" he snorted. "That's all you've got to say? I missed you, y'know. You've gotten more handsome too," he mused, wrapping his fingers around my jaw.

"Don't touch me with your filthy hands. Who knows where they've been?" I snapped, slapping it away.

"Aw, c'mon, Desmond, don't be like that. We used to go to the same school. Don't you remember me?"

"How could I forget the guy whose nose I broke?" I snorted. "Richard, isn't it?"

Rick's nose flared so wide, I thought I was going to get sucked into his nostrils. His friends let out a taunting 'ohhh' from behind. Rick snapped his head towards them, and they quickly quieted down, trying to keep a straight face. I held back an eye roll. He was still so uncool.

"Richard, Ricardo, Renaldo, no, no, that's not it," I mused, pretending to be deep in thought. "Oh right, Rex! It's Rex, isn't it?"

Rick, who obviously didn't like my sense of humor, roughly pushed me against the brick wall with a snarl. I looked at him with a raised brow

"Come on now, I thought you just wanted to talk?" I chuckled half-heartedly.

"You haven't changed at all," he muttered. "You think you're better than us because you go to a swanky school for stuck-up rich kids?"

"I think I'm better than you, period," I retorted.

"You still think you're so-"

"Utterly handsome? A genius? A total womanizer? Why yes, yes I do," I smiled, which just made him boil with even more anger. He raised his fist, hitting my right cheek before I could dodge, and the fact that he was wearing big metal rings didn't help at all, the copper tang of blood staining my taste buds.

"Now that's just playing dirty," I chuckled coldly. "I felt bad for breaking your nose since you already look so ugly, but it seems like I have no other choice but to do it-"

I clenched my fist, slamming it against his nose and hearing a loud "crack". He fell to the ground, howling in pain.

"Again." I grinned in satisfaction. Rick's posse flickered their eyes from Rick to me.

"What are you waiting for? Get him!" Rick bellowed, pinching his bleeding nose. I wasn't the strongest guy in the streets, but I've been in a fair number of scuffles, so I knew how to throw a punch or two. Who needed boxing gloves when you had bare fists and survival instincts? I took out two of them, but the other three shoved me to the ground and kicked my stomach and ribs.

I bared my teeth at the piercing pain but reached out, grabbing one of them by the ankles and jerking it towards my chest. The boy lost his balance and fell back, creating a minor distraction that bought me enough time to get back on my feet. I punched another to the ground. But the odds were against my favor. They outnumbered me. Before I knew it, they had all gotten up, including Rick, and approached me with hungry eyes and sardonic grins.

I knew it was an impossible win, but I stayed to fight. I blinked away the black blobs that darkened my vision, and with one last effort, I pounced on the boy standing closest to me with a war cry, clinging onto his back and relentlessly beating my fists against his head like a crazy person. He screamed, scratching at me, desperately trying to get me off, but I pulled at his hair and held on. I probably looked stupid from afar, but I was doing the best I could.

Two pairs of hands seized me, and I fell to the ground with a yelp. After that, everything became a blur, and all I could remember was wincing as they beat me up all at once. I laid on the dirty ground, wheezing and

gasping to get air through my lungs while trying not to lose consciousness. I didn't know how long it lasted, but eventually, they stopped

"Hey, maybe we went a bit too far?" I heard one of them whisper.

"Tsk, it's fine. Look, he's waking up," I heard Rick say.

"He looks like he's about to piss his pants." Smirked one of them, breathing out a puff of smoke right in my face which made me cough. Rick picked me up by the collar, my head tilting slightly back as I slowly gained consciousness.

He shook his head in disapproval.

"Oh, Desmond, you've always been like this. You're always putting on a mask and acting tough. But look at you, you're pathetic. You're weak. You've got nothing going on for you, but you keep acting like you're invincible. One day, you're gonna break. Why don't you just admit that you can't handle it?"

Why didn't I? I suppressed the question deep into the back of my mind.

"You, you really think that I'm, I'm scared of you?!" I cackled, involuntarily spitting blood on his face. "You're nothing but a coward who can't face me on your own! You act like you're the one who beat me up but sorry to break it to you, Rex, but it's the five other idiots standing behind you who did all the work. Talk about pathetic!"

I watched as his lips curled and knew right away that I was done for.

Oh Desmond, you really don't know when to shut up, do you?

His hand balled up into a fist as he raised it to a perfect angle that would most likely knock me out clean. I held my breath, waiting for him to hit me.

CLICK

We all looked towards the sound that came from above, our eyes widening in shock.

Chapter 9: The Class Prince to the Rescue

Leaning against the ledge of the window from the building above was the last person I wanted to see.

"Did you just take a picture?!" hissed Rick, the first one to break the long silence.

"Oh, I forgot to mute it," murmured Ivan, completely ignoring Rick as he examined his phone.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!"

Ivan finally looked towards him as if he only just noticed his presence. Wow, even outside of school he had the ability to give zero fucks.

"You boys are making too much of a ruckus," he sighed. "If you don't want this picture to be reported to the police, then I advise you make your way back to your little rat holes."

"Ha, you think that we're scared of you?!" snorted Rick, straightening his back.

"Six Rogue Teenagers Beat Up Helpless Boy in Dark Alley, Saved by Handsome Bystander'," Ivan said, motioning the palm of his hand from one side to the other as he was already imagining the title of the news article. "Sounds catchy for next week's headlines, don't you think?"

Rick's friends started to murmur among themselves until one of them finally had the guts to interrupt Rick's stare off with Ivan.

"You think you scare us?" Rick laughed. He let go of me and turned towards the prince, who was leaning against the ledge of his castle with a bored expression on his face.

"Why don't you come down here and show us how tough you are?" Rick challenged.

"Now why would I do something as dumb as that when I'm clearly outnumbered? Don't associate Desmond's stupidity with me."

And we're back to the hateful Ivan.

"Hey Ricky, maybe we should leave," he murmured. "You got what you wanted, we already beat the crap out of the guy."

"Hey, Rick, maybe we should leave," whispered one of the smarter ones. "We can't get in trouble with the police again. You're under probation, remember?"

Rick's jaw tightened. He was ruthless, but not an idiot. He turned towards me with cold eyes.

"This isn't over, Desmond. I'll come back for you," he muttered and I smiled.

"Sounds more like a confession than a threat, hawk nose," I smiled innocently. "Still not over me I see."

Rick kicked me in the gut, knocking the breath out of me as I gagged for air.

Okay, yeah, I totally deserved that one

Rick spat a string of unintelligent words before leading his posse down the alley. When they were out of sight, I used the last of my energy to sit up against the brick wall, letting out quick, ragged breaths. It hurt. Everything hurt.

I wrapped my arms around my stomach, trying to fight back the tears and nausea. I tilted my head back, involuntarily locking eyes with Ivan. Oh right, he was still here. I sat there, dreadfully waiting for him to laugh and make fun of me like he did this morning, but to my surprise, he asked a question instead.

"How long are you planning on sitting there like that?" he asked, leaning his cheek against his palm. "The back door's open."

I looked down and saw a navy blue door beside the dumpsters but didn't move.

"Suit yourself," I heard him mumble. I blinked towards him, my eyes widening as I saw him leave.

"I can't move!" I admitted sheepishly. Asking this guy for help was the last thing I wanted to do, but I didn't have much of a choice. He glanced towards me, scratching the nape of his neck and muttering something under his breath before disappearing behind the window.

The blue door opened, and Ivan stood at the threshold. The light behind him made him look like an angel who had come to my rescue. His dark hair was neatly slicked back, and he wore a starch white shirt with a nametag pinned on the left pocket. His sleeves were rolled up to his forearms, revealing the veins that trailed down his strong arms, and he had a black apron tied around his waist. Ivan walked up to me and bent down to reach

my eye level. I flinched when his fingers wrapped around my jaw to study my face.

Was he working as a waiter?

He walked towards me and bent down, reaching out to gently touch my chin with his warm fingers, examining my face from left to right.

"They beat you up real good, didn't they?" he muttered in a husky voice.

I looked away, feeling embarrassed that he had to see me in such a miserable.

He took my arm, gently putting it over his shoulders to help me stand. I winced in pain, biting down on my lower lip as I forced my bruised limbs to move.

"Don't be such a wuss," I heard him sigh.

"Shut up," I hissed, feeling every bruise ache as I moved my muscles.

His tone was crisp, and his words were harsh, but he let me lean against him. I could tell that he was being careful, taking small steps, and shifting his pace in ways that would make the pain tolerable for me. We walked through the backdoor and into the building. I felt vulnerable and pathetic leaning onto him, but I knew that my bruised legs wouldn't have been able to support my weight without his help.

What made this situation even worse was that any bystander could see the obvious contrast between Ivan and me. He was graceful, and I was clumsy. He was careful, and I was reckless. He was immaculate; I was bloody and bruised. Ivan tightened his grip around my waist when he noticed that I was slowing down.

We entered the building and stopped in front of a door that had the sign "staff only" hung on it. He tapped in a code before pushing it open, sitting me down on the nearest couch.

"My shift ends in ten minutes. Wait for me" he said. It was neither a request nor a demand. I noticed that his white shirt was covered in smudges of dirt and blood.

"Um..." My voice trailed. Without a word, he picked up a black blazer and swiftly slipped it on. He buttoned it up to hide the stains and ran a palm over the side of his hair to flatten out the stray strands. Each movement was quick and efficient. It was like watching a real prince. He caught me staring, and I averted my gaze. Ah yes, and then there was me, the miserable dirty peasant.

"Sorry about your shirt," I mumbled sheepishly.

"If you're going to apologize, you can at least try to make it sound sincere," he chuckled softly. I blinked, adjusting my eyes back towards him. As our eyes locked, I could feel myself getting lost in his grey hues, as if they were pulling me in like magnets.

I'm sorry, is what I wanted to say.

"That won't be possible," is what came out.

He gave me a small smile before leaving. As soon as the door closed, I let out a loud groan, finally expressing my pain as I clutched onto my aching gut. Everything felt broken and my body felt like it was on fire, a churning pain making it hard for me to even breathe.

I closed my eyes, the image of Ivan smiling appearing in my mind.

I didn't quite understand his personality. He looked at me with those heartless, cold eyes and spoke to me like I was nothing but trash, and after what happened yesterday morning, I was almost sure that he hated me. Yet, there was something in his actions that showed kindness and warmth.

Wait, why am I even thinking about him? Why should I care if he likes me or not, it's not like it matters.

My phone rang, breaking me out of my thoughts and I looked down at the screen with horrified eyes.

It was my mom.

It was past my curfew and I had already missed 14 calls from her. I bit my bloody lip, hovering my thumb over the call button, debating on whether I should face the consequences now or savor my life while I still had one.

But as I was arguing with my two consciousnesses, I accidentally answered.

Well, it was nice having a life while it lasted.

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Chapter 10: What About Me?

"DESMOND MELLOW, WHERE ARE YOU?!" Mom shouted, almost making me drop the phone. "Do you know what time it is? How can you be out so late on a school night? You were supposed to be home two hours ago! Do you know how worried I was?"

"I was at the bookstore," I answered nervously.

"For four hours?"

I gulped. "There were a lot of interesting books."

"Are you still at the bookstore?"

"Well," I looked around and eyed the shelf across from me, "there's a book in this room."

"DESMOND-"

"Something came up, but I swear it wasn't my fault."

"You swear? We do not swear in this household, young man.' "

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. "I promise," I corrected myself.

"Are you by yourself?"

"No, I'm with," I scrunched my nose and tried not to gag, "a friend."

"What happened?"

How was I supposed to tell her that Rick and his cronies jumped me, almost beat me to death, and then saved by Prince Charming the villain, without sounding crazy? I stalled time instead.

"So there was this bird," I began.

"You got into another fight, didn't you?" she cut me off. Her bitter tone made me frown.

"No, I-"

"Desmond Mellow, don't you dare lie to me."

There was no getting out of this, was there?

"Okay, fine. I got into a fight, but it wasn't my fault. I can explain."

"I told you to stop fighting, didn't I? You promised to be on your best behavior," she said, her anger turning into flat-out disappointment. I didn't know what struck harder, the disappointment in her voice or the fact that she wouldn't even hear me out.

"I didn't have a choice! I left the bookstore but when I crossed the road-"

"I don't want to hear another one of your chicken crossing the road jokes!" she snapped. I threw my hands in the air, but the gesture made my sore limbs ache.

"I'm not joking this time. Will you just hear me out? Please?" I begged her.

"Arthur never fought."

I stiffened. Once again, my emotions turned jagged, and my insides tightened. I was supposed to be used to this by now, so why did it hurt so much? Ever since I was a kid, the world and the people in it seemed keen on constantly reminding me I wasn't good enough. I wasn't good enough for my parents; I wasn't good enough for Junjay High; I wasn't good enough for Ivory high; I wasn't even good enough for Ivan. I didn't think that existing would be so hard. I thought all I'd have to do was breathe, eat, shit, and live. But no, it was more like trying my hardest every day to survive in a world where I'd never be the best at anything, knowing that there would always be someone better than me.

Anger started to build inside of me, my hands starting to tighten as I gritted my teeth, but then I slowly unclenched, my eyes falling to my lap my vision started to blur.

It was always about Arthur, wasn't it?

"Arthur would have never stayed out this late. He would have answered my calls and messages. Why can't you be more like-"

With nausea that swirled unrestrained in my stomach, I made an attempt to speak in a steady voice, swallowing back the lump in my throat. "I'm not Arthur," I whispered.

"Well, you should be."

I felt a stab in the chest.

"Mom," I whispered in a broken voice, but she must not have heard me. She never did.

"How can you two be so different? We raised you under the same roof, so why-"

"Because I'm not your perfect little Arthur, and I never will be! I'll never be as great as him, okay? What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? Is that what you want?" My lungs burned when I screamed at her, and tears streamed down my face. Everything hurt. Breathing, talking, existing, everything hurt. And I wish it didn't. "I'm sorry that I'm not good enough,

okay? I'm sorry that I can't meet your expectations, that I'm not smart or talented. I'm sorry for being such a failure, for my flaws and imperfections, for being the disappointment of the family, I'm sorry for being me!"

The words grated my throat like sandpaper, and my bruised face fell into the palm of my bloody hand.

"I'm not Arthur because I can't be him. I just can't," I sobbed. "Why can't you love me for who I am? Why is it always about Arthur? Why does it always, always, have to be about him? What about Desmond? Your youngest son? What about me?"

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean-"

"Yes, Mom, yes, you did." And that was the worst part. "I'm not coming home tonight, so don't wait for me."

"Wai-"

I ended our call and turned my phone off, tossing it aside. I didn't care if it broke; it was already cracked anyway. When I closed my eyes, all I could see was anger, and when I opened them, tears stung my eyes. No matter what I did, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't escape the pain.

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Chapter 11: Addicted

I listened to the monotonous ticking of the clock, but I heard footsteps outside the door. I quickly fanned my face, trying to dry away the tears from my swollen eyes. My hands dropped to my sides when the door opened. Ivan stepped in, looking just as perfect as he did when he left.

"Has it already been ten minutes?" I asked, trying to sound upbeat.

"It's been an hour."

My eyes widened in surprise. "You said your shift ended in ten minutes. What took so long?"

He shrugged his jacket off. "The customers dined longer than we'd expected."

"Oh."

Why did I feel like he was lying?

"Does it hurt?"

"No," I lied. Ivan leaned his waist against the table and crossed his arms over his broad chest. He studied me from head to toe.

"You look like you're about to cry," he deadpanned.

"You try simultaneously getting beaten up by five guys." It was six, but Rick wasn't deemed worthy of my consideration.

"Now, why would I do something as stupid as that?" he mused, his voice taking a tone of amusement and mockery. I cast him a dark glare, but he remained indifferent.

"Can you walk?"

"Of course I can," I huffed.

"I don't think you can." I held back an eye roll, but only because it hurt to move my pupils.

"Is that your thing? Asking questions and making up with your own answers?" I shot.

"Is acting tough and masking your feelings with terrible lies yours?"

Touché

"If you're done playing the tough guy, get up. We're leaving," he said, picking up my bag, which he must have retrieved in the alley.

"To where?"

"To my place. I can't leave you here. The other servers are going to close the restaurant soon. I live a few blocks away. You won't have to walk for long."

For a second, I almost thought he was being nice, but then remembered that he was Ivan, and quickly chased that absurd thought away.

"Look, I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, but it's getting late. I can take a taxi home."

"Do you have cash?" he asked flatly.

I squeezed my hands together. "Um, no, but I can walk home. My mom is going to worry if I don't return soon."

Truth was, I wasn't planning to go home, not after the argument I had with her. I didn't know where I'd go. Maybe I could find a comfortable bench to sleep on in a park.

"And you think showing up with fresh cuts and bruises is going to reassure her?"

I pointed to the bandage plastered under my eye, the one I had found in my pocket earlier.

"I've got it covered." Pun intended.

"Don't tell me you're planning on sleeping on the streets."

My eyes widened. "How did you know?"

"I didn't," he said with a serene smile. My mouth dropped wide open.

"You manipulative piece of--"

"Let's go home," he cut me off and squatted in front of me, glancing over his shoulder. "Hop on."

I raised my hand to stop him.

"It's going to be a no from me," I said, doing my best imitation of Simon Cowell.

He rolled his beautiful eyes. "Either you get on my back, or I'll carry you bridal-style. Your choice."

My eyes darted towards the door, but who was I kidding? I'd fall flat on my face the second I tried getting up. I weighed my options. Option number one, I could go home and face my mom. Nope. Option numero dos, I could spend the night outside and freeze to death. Meh, that didn't sound like a bad idea. And third but not least, I could spend the night at Ivan's place. As if I wanted to spend another second with this jerk.

Did I?

I mentally shook my head, surprised at the sudden thought.

"Well?" he asked impatiently.

I hesitated at first, but slowly climbed onto his back, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He stood up with a small grunt, securing his strong arms under my knees. He smelled of sweat and pine, a boyish smell that I liked.

Oh hoe, you did not just admit that you enjoyed sniffing this dude.

I groaned, pressing my forehead against Ivan's shoulder, and getting an even better whiff of his glorious scent. Who allowed this dangerous boy to exist? Who in their right mind thought it was a good idea to go to the depth of Hell and bring back this seductive demon?

"Does it hurt that much?" Worry laced his tone.

"Just don't drop me. I'll sue you if you do."

My broke ass wasn't going to sue anyone in this lifetime, but he laughed anyway, and this time, I knew I wasn't hallucinating.

"Of course, your highness."

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Chapter 12: The Devil's Den

The elevator ground to a halt and the metal doors opened. Ivan, who carried me all the way to his apartment, walked down the fancy corridors and stopped in front of a door. He took out his keys, and my body stiffened.

"I hope your parents won't mind me staying," I murmured. "Because if they do, I can just-"

"I live alone," he said.

Of course, he did.

"Oh," was all I said.

Not only did I have to spend the night at Ivan's place, but I also had to spend it with him alone. Why did he live by himself? When we were inside, Ivan flicked on the lights. I was expecting an apartment full of unfinished delivery food, unwashed dishes, and dirty laundry, but his house was pristine clean.

The living room had a flat-screen TV hanging on the wall, and there was a black leather couch made for at least a family of four. Most of the furniture was in monochromatic colors and had simple designs. Whoever decorated the interior definitely had an expensive and sophisticated taste.

But as impressive as everything was, the lack of personal touch struck me: No silly family pictures, no art crafts from his childhood, no green plants to give the apartment some life and color, nothing. Everything here was purely functional. It was a perfect but cold place, just like him.

Ivan set his keys on the counter and carried me to his room. His king-sized bed was in the middle of the room, big and high, draped in soft satin blankets. He had ironed every piece of fabric to perfection. He pulled out the black office chair from his desk and carefully sat me down.

"Was I too heavy?" I asked sheepishly, watching him roll his shoulders.

"I thought I was carrying a cow."

My nose made a funny nasal noise.

"Relax, I was kidding."

"I don't like your humor, sir."

"Few people do," he shrugged. He opened his closet, and I glimpsed his neatly ironed clothes that were color-coordinated.

"You really like keeping everything clean, don't you?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Which is why I might have to burn the chair you're sitting on."

I let out a nervous laugh, unable to tell if he was being genuine or if it was his dry sense of humor.

"You can wear these," he said, handing me a sweater and a pair of grey sweatpants. "You can use my bathroom to wash off the dirt and blood. I'll take a shower in the guest's room. Oh, and Desmond?"

The agreeable trace of his smooth, husky voice made my stomach do a somersault. It was the first time he had said my name, and I suddenly wished that he'd say it more often.

"Yes?"

His gaze met mine, and for a second, I thought we were having a moment.

"Don't bleed on my bathroom floor," he deadpanned.

Well, so much for having a moment. He left, and I wheeled the chair to the bathroom. I took in a deep breath before pulling myself onto my feet, using the walls as support. I winced at each step, trying to convince myself that the next footfall wouldn't be as painful as the previous ones. I made it to the sink, but when I looked up towards the mirror, I yelped in surprise.

Yeesh, my face.

There was a trail of dried blood that streaked down the side of my face. My left eye was more bloated than the other one, and I knew from experience that the surrounding skin would eventually turn an ugly purple. Discovering the bruises on my body as I took my clothes off wasn't a fun process either. When I stepped into the shower and water poured on my head, dirt and blood disappeared down the drain between my feet. I shampooed twice for Ivan's sake.

I had a love and hate relationship with showers. I was always too lazy to take a shower, and it took me a lot of effort and self-persuasion to get myself on my feet and to the bathroom, but once I was under warm water and surrounded by the rising mist, I never wanted to leave my newly founded sanctuary. Showers were when I'd reflect on my deepest thoughts, and I couldn't help but think about Ivan. My brain had embedded his face

into my mind. It wasn't like I stared at his face while he was asleep in class. No, that would be creepy.

I studied his features for educational purposes, wondering how someone could have such vivid eyes like he did. I also liked his lips. They looked soft, like cotton candy, and I wondered what they'd tasted like... My eyes flung open and I stopped myself from thinking any further. What was going on with me? Why was I thinking about Ivan while showering? It must be the smell of his shampoo. Damn it, this stuff was like a drug. It was messing with my mind.

I finished showering and put on Ivan's clothes. The sleeves of his sweater went well past my wrists, and I laughed softly as I reminded myself of Charlie and how he was always being swallowed up by his clothes. Unable to fight the temptation, I brought the sleeves to my nose inhaling Ivan's eyes flung open.

What's wrong with me?

I slapped myself across the face and yelped from the stinging pain. Good. That ought to bring some sense into me.

I left the bathroom as neatly as I could, and sat on the chair, strolling myself back towards the desk. Ivan hadn't returned yet, so I took advantage of his absence to study his room more closely. I tried to find an object that might hold some personal value to him, but there was nothing. There was a bed, a closet, a nightstand, and other practical items, but nothing that he'd grab first if his house were on fire.

I sighed, giving up, and rested my head on his desk, which was when something caught my eye. There was a picture frame that adorned his desk. It was a photo of Ivan when he was younger. He looked twelve or thirteen, but not any older. He was in what looked like a beautiful European street the ones you saw in French or Italian movies - standing beside a man. Someone had taken the picture from behind so you couldn't see his face, only Ivan's side profile was visible. Ivan was smiling. That's right. smiling. And perhaps it was the bright weather, but the uncertain color of his eyes appeared clear-blue in the photo.

I felt a pang of envy. Who was the person next to him? A brother? A childhood friend? He must be someone special if he made Ivan smile like that. Before I could make any more assumptions, I heard footsteps outside the room and quickly put the picture back where it was. I turned my chair, pretending to contemplate something else in the room, but there was

nothing but furniture to stare at, so I looked at my feet instead. I scowled. Why were my toes so ugly?

When Ivan walked in, I waited a few seconds before raising my eyes. I could see the contrast between him in the photo and him right now. He grew more handsome than he was before, but there was an undeniable loneliness in his grey eyes.

"What?" Ivan asked when he noticed me staring. I looked over his shoulder, fixating the sad, empty wall behind him. There was hardly any difference.

"Nothing," I replied. "Nothing at all."

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Chapter 13: Apologies

Ivan brought a first-aid kit with him and put it on the desk. I watched him roll up his sleeves. He opened the metal box and took out some Q-Tips and an ointment.

"What are you doing?" I asked guardedly.

"You have cuts and scratches on your face, I don't want them to scar."

I leaned away as soon as he got closer, pressing my palms against his steel chest to stop him. He looked down at my hand and raised a brow. Flustered, I pulled away.

"I only accept treatment from certified doctors. You don't look like you have a doctorate in medicine."

"You don't look like you have a degree in stupid, but you could definitely graduate tomorrow."

I gasped. "How dare you?"

He tried coming closer, but I dodged his hand.

"Fine," he said, putting the supplies back into the kit. "I'll take you to the hospital. Have a professional doctor take care of you while a nurse calls your parents to pick you up. I'm sure your mom will be delighted to see the state you're in."

He stood up to leave. Impulsively, I reached out and caught the hem of his shirt. He glared at me, and I lowered my eyes. Floors have never looked prettier.

"Don't go," I mumbled feebly. "I was joking."

My eyes widened when I felt his fingers run through my half-dried hair, pulling my head back so I'd look up and meet his gaze. His eyes held an intense gaze, but the crease of his brows softened.

"You're a mess," he said.

"I know."

He pulled away and picked up the ointment. This time, I let him touch my face. His fingers wrapped around my jaw and he pulled me closer towards him. His hands were strong and rigid - probably because he boxed and worked at a restaurant- but he was gentle with me. His usual playful

smile and fatuous smirk now formed a thin line, and his brows furrowed as he focused on my injuries.

How could someone look this handsome even this close? No acne, no blackheads, no wrinkles, nothing. I couldn't pinpoint a single flaw. My eyes slowly trailed up the curve of his jaw, his tall symmetrical nose, before stopping at his eyes. They were neither blue nor grey, but a mix between a sea of cornflower blue and a jagged silver fire.

"Breathe," he said, snapping me out of my trance. I realized that I was holding my breath, and quickly inhaled, feeling oxygen reach my burning lungs. I felt my cheeks flush red in embarrassment. Pull yourself together, Desmond! Pull. Yourself. Together!

"Stop flinching," he ordered, applying more cream on my cheekbone. "If it hurts, tell me. I'll be gentler."

I puffed up my chest. "I'm fine."

"You're a terrible liar."

"How would you know?" I growled.

"You're an open book."

"Oh, so you can read people's feelings now?" I snorted.

"Only yours."

"Why only mine?"

His eyes met mine. "Because you're you, Desmond."

My eyes widened. The sudden urge to cry came so abruptly that a lump had already formed in my throat. Those three words were all I've ever wanted to hear since I was a kid. 'Because you're you.'

When he turned towards the kit, I mustered up the courage to say what had been weighing on my mind. I even practiced my speech in the shower like the damn fool I was.

, "I know we started off on the wrong foot. I had prejudiced thoughts on you, but it was wrong of me. It's just that you remind of someone.

"Who did I remind you of?"

I inhaled sharply, debating on whether I should tell him.

"My older brother, Arthur," I finally said. "The two of you are alike in so many ways. You have it all without trying, and I was jealous. I felt like you were looking down on me, but I shouldn't have blamed my insecurities. You're actually not that bad of a person."

I was wrong about Ivan. If he thought he was better than me, he wouldn't have bothered saving me in the dark alley. He wouldn't have brought me to his house, lend me his clothes, or take care of me. I had misunderstood his dry sense of humor for superiority and his impassiveness for scorn.

"I shouldn't have called you a twat-faced bimbo yesterday," I mumbled.

"Oh right, that was very...inventive of you."

"I suck at apologies, so, unfuck you or whatever."

To my surprise, his eyes softened, and a smile etched on his lips.

"You're so bad at apologies," he chuckled.

"I'm trying, okay?"

"I know."

My heart tugged.

"And thanks," I croaked.

"For what?"

"For saving me back at... For saving me."

He looked so beautiful when he smiled.

"Well, at least your thank you's aren't that bad."

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Chapter 14: Gossiping and Fake ID's

I felt something warm shine over my face, the streak of sunlight slowly awakening me from my sleep. I let a small groan, rolling to the side to find refuge from the daylight but accidentally fell off the bed, falling to the ground with a loud yelp. Groaning, I slowly sat up. My eyes widened as I realized that I was still in Ivan's room, my mind starting to recollect everything that happened last night.

I slowly picked myself up, trying to ignore the aching pain from the bruises and scratches while scanning the room. Ivan was nowhere to be in sight and the photo that was sitting on his table was gone as well. Narrowing my eyes, I picked up the yellow stick note that was plastered in the middle of his table.

I'm going to school so don't mess anything up while I'm gone. I'll be back at 7:00 p.m, wait for me.

P.s: You snore like a pig.

I gritted my teeth, scrunching the paper in my hand and throwing it into the trash can.

"So annoying," I mumbled under my breath as I sat back on the bed. But my brows furrowed. How did I get on his bed in the first place? I don't recall climbing up here. Maybe he carried me. But then, where did he sleep? And if he went to school, then why didn't he wake me up?

I raised my shirt and looked at my bruised abs and torso that was covered in scratches and purple blobs, scowling.

I guess that's why.

I lay back down, letting out a small sigh as I took a few minutes to recollect my thoughts. I then reached over and grabbed my phone, ignoring the missed calls from my mom and checking the messages in the group chat with Charlie, Trevor, and Scott instead.

Charlie: Desy, where are you? :(

I started typing.

Me: I had a small accident. I won't be able to make it to school today I was about to put my phone down, but it buzzed immediately. I checked the

time. It was 9:30 a.m. Wasn't he supposed to be in class?

Charlie: Are you sick?

Charlie: Or did something happen between you and the class prince?

Me: No, nothing happened.

Charlie: Funny, because he's been telling the class a whole different story.
My eyes widened.

Me: What?! Really?!

I tapped my fingers against my lap, anxiously waiting for the typing bubble to disappear.

Charlie: Gotcha ;)

I stared at his message and gritted my teeth, letting out an annoyed groan.
Why did I have to be so gullible?!

Me: You know I hate you, right?

Charlie: Love you too sweetie xx

Charlie: So you're going to tell me what happened, right?

Me: Don't have much of a choice now, do I? Whatever, I'll tell you when I come back to school.

Charlie: When's that? I miss you, you know :'(

Me: Die.

Charlie: Come back soon Desy wesyy <3

Just as I was about to put my phone down, Trevor sent a message.

Trevor: Ohhh, seems like some drama's been going on between Desmond and the class prince.

Me: Great, Trev's here.

Trevor: You might want to fix your auto-correction. I think you meant: omg, the greatest and coolest man on Earth is FINALLY here!!!

Me: No, I meant what I said.

Trevor: I can't wait to hear about your adventures with the prince.

Me: You two are like old gossiping ladies, you know that, right?

Scott: Hi :)

Me: Three*

Trevor: Dude, where are you?

Me: I'm at Ivan's house.

Trevor: YOU'RE WHAT?!

I pursed my lips. I really didn't think this through.

Trevor: Did you sleep at his house?

Me: Kind of?

Trevor: Did you get the D?

I narrowed my eyes with pursed lips.

Me: I got a D in History if that's what you're asking.

Trevor: Did you two do the dirty deeds?

Me: What are you talking about?

Trevor: Boy, I'm asking you if he popped your cherry.

Despite being behind a screen, I could feel the heat rise to my face as I quickly typed back.

Me: No, ofc not! I hardly know the guy!

Besides, I'm straight.

Trevor: And I'm Batman.

I rolled my eyes.

Charlie: You're always staring at him in class.

Trevor: Yeah, and you look like you daydream about him a lot.

They were tag-teaming me. Where was Scott? Oh right, he was probably the only one paying attention in class.

Charlie: Xander told me he overheard Mr. Power asking Ivan to tutor you, and apparently, he said yes.

Charlie: Teachers always ask him

to help other students since he's the smartest in our grade, but he always says no. This is the first time he's agreed to tutor another student.

Trevor: I call dibs on being the best man at the marriage. Scott can be the priest, and Charlie can be the flower boy who aggressively throws petals at people's faces.

Trevor: And of course, we all know who the husband and husband are ;)

Scott: Btw, rumor has it that Jason's gonna be throwing an epic party in a couple of weeks. Anyone in?

I smiled, grateful that Scott was always there to come to my rescue.

Me: Will there be girls?

Trevor: Of course there'll be girls.

Trevor: And the Class Prince wink wonk.

Me: You really aren't going to stop pestering me with him, are you?

Trevor: Of course not! You two are now my new otp.

I paused, narrowing my eyes.

Me: Your what now?

Trevor: One true pairing??? Have you never seen the word before?

Me: Uh, no.

Trevor: ...I don't think we can be friends anymore.

Charlie: Can we bring beer to the party?

Me: Charlie, people mistake you for a 12-year-old kid, no one is going to sell you alcohol.

Me: Besides, none of us are old enough.⁹

Trevor: Dw kiddos, I've got it covered.

Me: Trevor, you're not of legal age either.

Trevor: Pish posh, the ID in my wallet says I am.

Me: I don't think that that's a very good idea...

Trevor: Come on Des, don't be a party pooper. The worst ideas are always the best ideas!

Me: If you get in trouble, Scott and I won't be there to help you.

Trevor: What do you mean, Scott's the one who forged my fake ID.

Me: ...

Scott: :)

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Chapter 15: Friend or Foe?

I was sitting on the couch, trying to solve a math equation that I've been struggling with for the past hour.

"This doesn't make any sense!" I shouted in frustration, slumping in my seat. I looked over towards the clock and frowned.

It was already 7:30 p.m, why hasn't he come back?

And then I heard keys outside the door. The doorknob twisted and Ivan stepped in, glancing towards me with a smile.

"Miss me?" he smirked and I narrowed my eyes.

"Who'd miss you?" I snorted, my arms crossed over my chest. Sure, I've been anticipating your arrival, glancing towards the clock every ten minutes and anxiously waiting for you to come back, but I didn't miss you.

"How's your face?" he asked.

"Great, thanks."

He walked over towards me and gently lifted my chin, brushing a finger over one of my scratches. My eyes widened as his face was only inches away from mine.

Too close, too close, too close!

When Ivan placed his hand on my jaw, it was as if he was touching my entire core. A tingling sensation jolted down my spine. I quickly pulled away, my heart pounding against my chest. What was he trying to do? Give me a heart attack?!

"Does it still hurt?" he asked, unfazed.

"I'm healing," I grumbled hoarsely. He just grunted, walking off to his room. As soon as he disappeared around the corner, I looked down at my chest and scowled.

No, stop that! Stop beating so quickly!

While I mentally scolded myself, Ivan came back wearing a new pair of clothes. He sat down beside me and took a look at the equation that I was trying to solve.

"You're studying?" he said.

"Don't act so surprised."

He cocked a brow. "Who said I was acting?"

I was ready to punch him, but then he said, "Mr. Power said that you were having trouble studying."

"I don't need your help," I growled.

"Your grades say otherwise."

"You think you're smarter than me?" I snapped.

"I know I am," he chuckled, unbuttoning his shirt and disappearing into his room. When he left, I pressed my hand against my chest and felt my heart pounding.

No, stop that! Stop beating so hard for that jerk!

His arm brushed over mine when he leaned over to look at the equation I was solving. Well, the one I was trying to solve. I closed the notebook before he could see. He'd probably laugh at my answers and tell me I was stupid. I wasn't stupid. I just wasn't good at math. There was a difference.

"Let me see," he said.

"I'm not done."

He rolled his bluish-grey eyes. "Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Desmond," he growled, his voice sending tingles down my spine. "Give me the notebook while I'm still being nice."

This was him being nice?!

"Fine, but I'll nuke you if you laugh," I mumbled. I handed him the tattered notebook and anxiously waited for him to finish correcting my answer. A few minutes passed.

"Did I get it wrong?" I asked hesitantly.

"What do you mean?" he mumbled absently, still focused on the paper.

"You look like you want to rip your head off."

"Sorry, that's just how my face works," he chuckled, finally handing me back my paper. "You got it right."

"Really?!" I gasped.

"No, dummy, you forgot the brackets."

Before I could flip the table, he took my pen and started to explain the equation. I could tell that he was breaking down his sentences into simple words and spoke slowly so that I wouldn't have a hard time keeping up. But it was hard to concentrate on what he was saying when I kept getting distracted by his mesmerizing face. How could someone so annoying look so divine?

"Hey, are you listening?" he asked, tapping my forehead with my pen. I quickly snapped out of it and cleared my voice.

Of course not.

"Absolutely."

"Pay attention," he sighed.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you," I grumbled, trying not to get distracted by his face again. He continued to explain the equation.

"Alright, now try solving it again."

I picked up my pen and began doing the equation, trying my best to remember everything he had told me. When I was done, he checked my answer. A few long minutes passed, and then he suddenly rested his forehead against the table, closing his eyes. My stomach twisted into a nervous knot.

"Did I get it wrong again?" I asked frantically. "But I added the brackets this time."

"Make me food," he mumbled in a gruff voice, making my brows slowly draw together.

Did this boy just ask me to make him... Food?

I blinked. "What?"

"You got the equation right, so make me food."

A wide smile pulled up my lips as I stood up in excitement.

"Did I really get it right?!"

"Food," he grunted.

I tried to play it cool, but when I entered the kitchen, I did a quick victory dance, which hurt my sore limbs, and I clutched onto the counter, silently screaming in pain.

"What do you want to eat?" I winced, clearing my voice.

"Anything."

His voice was low and raspy, and I could tell that he was tired. Then again, he just came back from school and work before tutoring me. I felt guilty and decided to make it up to him with a decent dinner.

"I hope you don't mind me using your kitchen."

I opened the cupboards and found a box of pasta and tomato sauce. I rummaged around and grabbed a pot before heading over to the sink. I poured in water and turned the stove on, leaving the water to boil. When bubbles appeared, I poured in the dry pasta.

"So tell me," I heard him murmur in a raspy voice. "Why were you getting beat up by a bunch of punks yesterday?"

"One of them used to go to the same school as me. We never really got along."

"Why?"

I stirred the pasta with a fork, adding a pinch of salt. "He had a crush on me, but I turned him down."

There was a small pause. "Did you turn him down because you're straight or because he wasn't your type?"

I leaned against the counter and took a second to think about it. "Both I guess." I turned towards him and raised a brow. "Wait, how come you get to ask all the questions?"

Ivan remained silent.

"So, why did you agree to tutor me?" I asked, quickly changing the subject to a safer topic.

"Because you try."

My heart pounded against my chest, and a steady drum occupied my ears.

"How would you know? We never talk or hang out at school."

"No, but I've seen you study by yourself in the library after lunch. You look exhausted and on the verge of tears, but you never give up. You try, Desmond, that's why I agreed to help."

Ivan's eyes were still the same cold grey color, but something about them had changed. I turned my back towards him, staring at the boiling water. If he asked why my face was red, I could blame the steam.

"Next question," I blurted. "I saw a photo on your desk yesterday and was wondering who the person standing next to you was."

"He was someone special to me," Ivan said. "My parents are too busy with their jobs, so they hire people to take care of me. He was one of those people."

I frowned. "Oh."

"It's fine, I don't really know my parents anyway," he said, dismissing my worry. When I turned towards him, his face was emotionless, and I wondered how long it took him to learn how to mask his feelings like that. Or perhaps he taught himself to stop feeling at all.

"Don't say that."

"Accidents happen. I'm only here because my mother didn't want to get an abortion."

He spoke in such a factual way that it almost felt like he had dissociated himself from his own past and was talking about someone else. The hair on my arms stood at the thought of a mother and father telling their son he was a 'mistake.'

"Which is why I was so close to the person in the photo, he was all I had."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear."

He blinked at me and then laughed. "He's not dead, Des."

I felt a flush of embarrassment. "Well, you talk about him like he is."

Ivan rested his head on the table. "Dead or alive, it doesn't make much of a difference. He and I are nothing but history now," he murmured. "He wasn't fired. He quit his job and moved away for his studies."

It felt like he was saying, "He's the one who left me."

Even though Ivan tried to hide it, I could tell that he was sad and felt betrayed. Then again, his caretaker seemed to be the only source of love for Ivan when growing up. But it made me wonder just how strong their bond used to be. The way he spoke about him gave me the feeling that their relationship was more than just formal.

"What happened to the photo? It wasn't there this morning."

"I threw it away. I forgot I had it, and it was collecting dust on my desk. Is the food ready?"

He was changing the subject.

"Almost."

I drained the water out of the pot and put equal portions into two bowls, drowning them in pasta sauce. I found the silverware and set the table. He glared at the food, slowly picking up his fork and poking the clump of pasta with a scowl. He jiggled it in the air.

"I asked for food," he deadpanned.

"Yeah, but you never asked for good food."

I held my breath when he took a bite, anxiously watching him chew. He took another bite, and then another, and continued to eat.

"How does it taste?" I asked slowly.

"Terrible."

I fought back a smile, getting used to his humor now, and began eating too.

"Is it okay if I stayed here another night? I know I've caused you enough trouble, but I don't want to go yet," I said. home

"Because you want to be with me?" He said it in such a sweet tone that I felt heat rush to my cheeks.

"No, of course not!" I stuttered. "I got into an argument with my mom last night."

"Is she the one you were arguing on the phone?"

I froze stiff. "You heard?"

"It was hard not to considering how loudly you were yelling."

I sunk in my seat, wanting to disappear.

"You can stay the night," Ivan said.

"Really?"

"Really."

I stared at him and sighed.

"What?" he asked.

"I don't really understand you. One minute you're making fun of me and slamming me against lockers, and then the next, you save me from dark alleys and let me stay at your place. Am I supposed to consider you as a friend or an enemy?"

He looked at me with those deep grey eyes that could hold the secrets of the universe.

"Neither."

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Chapter 16: You're Sleeping With Me

Ivan gave me a new toothbrush to use. He changed them once every two weeks, which was why he had so many in his bathroom cabinet. I thought it was cute how clean he liked everything to be, and then I scolded myself for thinking he was cute. When I finished washing up, I went to Ivan's room to ask him where I'd sleep. My eyes widened when I opened the door. He was standing in front of his closet with nothing but a towel around his waist. Beads of water raced down his torso, and I followed their trail, admiring the curve of his shoulder blades down the muscles of his back before it sunk into the hem of the towel.

Ivan blinked when he saw me at the door and I looked away, only making myself look even more suspicious.

"Like what you see?" he mused, calmly reaching for a shirt and pulling it over his head. I took one last glance before quickly looking away.

"I should have knocked," I grumbled.

"It's fine, we're both guys."

The gentle thud of his towel that fell onto the floor made my imagination go wild. Ivan didn't seem bothered that he was exposing his bare ass and elephant trunk. I kept my eyes fixated on the door frame, trying not to let my curiosity get the better of me.

"Do you have any extra blankets?" I asked, breaking the unbearable silence.

"You can look now, Des. Why do you want blankets?"

"Am I not sleeping on the couch?"

"No," he said. "You're sleeping with me."

I blinked blankly, taking a few seconds to process what he just said. "Say what now?"

"You, me, bed." Ivan pointed at me, then himself, and finally to his bed. He sat down, leaning his back against a pillow and sprawling his legs out. He looked like a spoiled prince. The only thing missing was the multitude of servants fanning him and feeding him grapes from the vine.

"I'm not sleeping with you," I deadpanned.

"I won't bite," he said, but his eyes glistened with mischief. "Don't tell me you're shy."

"No, I'm not shy! It's just that... I mean..." I mumbled, struggling to find my words.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you said that you were straight," he murmured. "If you're uncomfortable with sleeping with me, then-"

"I am straight!" I argued angrily. "I'm as straight as a stick! I've slept with guys before without it turning weird!" I said defensively. I thought about childhood slumber parties when my friends and I would build forts with spare pillows, cushions, and blankets"

The smile on his face vanished. "You have?"

"I have," I echoed proudly.

"With who?"

"That's none of your beeswax, kind sir."

"Sleep with me," he sounded more insistent, almost annoyed. "If you've slept with other guys, then I don't see why you wouldn't sleep with me."

If I slept on the couch, Ivan would think I was attracted to him. Ha, as if I'd ever get nervous sleeping beside a guy. I felt his eyes follow me as I marched to the other side of the bed, lying down as far away from him as possible. I grabbed some pillows and stacked them between us.

Ha, as if I was going to get nervous over another guy. I'm straight as a stick, sleeping in the same bed with another dude was nothing!

He watched with a smug look on his face as I marched towards the bed, climbing on the other side and trying to stay as far away from him as possible. I quickly grabbed some pillows and placed them between us, building a small wall.

"Just stay on your side," I growled.

Ivan rolled his eyes, knocking down my wall without even hesitating. "You're being ridiculous."

"Ridiculous?!" I breathed.

"Look, if you find this awkward because you're attracted to me, then-"

"Wow, hold your beans."

He paused. "My what?"

"I, am not attracted to you because I, am not attracted to boys," I stated, my arms crossed across my chest.

"Good, then stop making a fuss and go to sleep," he said, flicking off the lights. I frowned at the sudden darkness, slowly scooting a bit closer towards Ivan. I was always afraid of sleeping too close to the edges, you never know what creepy things lived under the bed. I turned my back towards him so that I didn't have to face him and closed my eyes. But they suddenly flung open.

I slowly inched closer towards Ivan. You never knew what sorts of creepy monsters lurked under beds, especially one as big as Ivan's. I pulled the sheets over my chest and turned my back towards him.

"Why do you sleep so much?" I asked quietly.

"I don't like being awake."

"Oh."

A long silence broke through, and I squirmed under the blankets.

"Ivan?" I croaked.

"What?" he grumbled.

"It's really quiet."

"That's the point."

I squirmed some more, and I guess Ivan had caught on that I wasn't fond of the dark.

"I don't get as much sleep as you think," he said, filling the silence.

"You're always sleeping in class," I said.

"That's because you're there."

My heart thumped. "What?"

"I have insomnia and can't sleep at night, so I sleep in class, but even then, I have a hard time. But whenever you're beside me, I fall asleep like a baby. I think you might have a superpower. Being around you reassures me."

"Don't get used to it. I'm changing desk mates as soon as there's an empty seat."

"Don't," Ivan said, his voice suddenly serious. I was never planning on changing seats in the first place and only said that to tease him, but the tone of his voice made me curious.

"Why not?"

"Because I want you by my side."

I was glad that it was dark enough that he couldn't see me blush.

Unsure of how to respond, I pretended like I hadn't heard him and closed my eyes. A few minutes later, my lids flung open.

"Ivan?" I stuttered dryly. "Are you asleep?"

"Yes."

"Your arm," I said stiffly. "It's around my waist."

He gently tightened his grasp, resting his forehead against the nape of my neck. I could feel the warmth of his soft breaths dance against my bare skin, goosebumps traveling down my body. I tried to pull away, but he refused to let me go, pushing my back against his broad chest.

"Ivan, you're too close," I hissed.

"You're too far," he mumbled in a raspy voice, already half-asleep.

What was that even supposed to mean?!

I felt his warm, big hands slip under my shirt and trace up my abs. I bit on my lower lip just to hold back a small moan.

"Ivan," I begged, but he didn't answer. "Iva-"

"If you say my name again in that innocent voice of yours, I won't be able to hold myself back, so just shut up and go to sleep," he growled into my ear with that husky voice of his.

I knew that he just told me to shut up, and I'd normally be really ticked off, but his annoyed voice sounded so sexy that I actually wasn't mad about it.

Wait, what was I thinking?! We're talking about another guy right here, why in the world do I find him sexy?!

I could hear Ivan's gentle breaths from behind. He was already asleep, which meant that I could wriggle out of his arms if I wanted to. But I didn't. His embrace felt nice and comforting. Just for tonight, I let things be. I closed my heavy lids, slowly drifting asleep. Perhaps I had dreamt it, but during the night, I felt Ivan pull me closer against him, whispering, "You feel like home."

Chapter 17: Xander Al-dick

When I woke up, my legs and arms were tangled around his. Our faces were only inches apart, and my eyes widened in surprise. I let out a loud yelp and jerked back with so much force that I fell off the bed and landed with a loud thud, followed by a painful groan. The noise must have woken him up. Ivan slowly sat up, rubbing his tired eyes. His hair fell over his forehead and he pushed it back, yawning. How dare he look so perfect in the morning? How dare he?

He blinked at me. "Why are you on the floor? It's dirty."

Ivan got up, and the first thing he did was make the bed. He grabbed a fresh pair of clothes and walked to the bathroom to take a shower. Despite his childish tendencies, I found Ivan to be self-sufficient and mature for his age. Then again, he grew up so young. We had toast and eggs for breakfast. He drove me to school in a jet-black Porsche. It didn't even surprise me that he had such an expensive car. He told me that his parents were wealthy and subsidised him, sending him money and gifts instead of coming for Christmas or visiting on the holidays.

Not that it mattered or anything, but it left me curious and confused, so I asked him, "Why do you work as a server?"

"It keeps me busy."

"You like being busy?"

"I don't like being in my house," he corrected himself.

"Why not?"

A smile pulled at the corner of his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Haven't you noticed? It's empty."

When we arrived at school, we parted ways as if the last two days had never happened. I walked down the halls, already missing his presence. Everything felt dull and mediocre, and it felt as if I had woken up from an exciting dream and returned to reality.

"Desmond!"

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Charlie walking towards me. He waved at me with a cheerful smile that deepened his dimples. His bubbly

aura washed away some of my gloom until I noticed that he was wearing an oversized sweater, and that so was I, which reminded me I was wearing Ivan's clothes, which resulted in me thinking about him again. It was a vicious cycle, a circle that revolved around Ivan.

Charlie frowned. "What happened to your face?"

"Life."

"Hey, losers." Trevor grinned. He did a double-take when he saw me. "Wow, your face!"

"Thank you for that, Trevor," I said with fake enthusiasm, clapping his shoulder. He gave me a sheepish smile.

"What happened?" Scott asked.

"I got into a fight. But it's fine, I took care of it."

"I can see that," Trevor said sarcastically, staring at my black eye. "Did you fight with the Class Prince? I warned you, he's as tough as a professional boxer."

"No, not with him," I said, and I told them everything that had happened, skipping the part where he and I cuddled in bed, and the part where I may have liked it.

"He saved you, invited you to his house, and tutored you?" Trevor asked, impressed. "I've never seen him be so generous. He's usually not like that."

"He must really like you," Scott murmured, and my lips formed a frown. Scott was usually the one who stayed neutral. When he saw my confusion, he quickly explained.

"Ivan lets no one go to his house. He and I once had a science project to do together. He was nice. Well, nice might stretch it a bit, but he wasn't difficult to work with, and he was quite charming. Anyway, he made it clear that he didn't want to do the project at his house, so we either met at my place or went to the library."

"That's true," Charlie agreed. "The only person who's ever been to his house is his best friend."

"He has a best friend?" I asked in surprise.

"Lon!" To board someone coll

"Ivan!" We heard someone call.

"Well, speak of the devil," chuckled Trevor.

A tall boy who had to be at least six feet tall - ran up to Ivan, who was standing on the other end of the hall. He had short dark hair and tanned skin, a piercing on his left ear, and a metal chain necklace around his neck.

He looked like one of those 'too cool for school' types of boys, and just like the rest of the students here, he was one hell of a looker. I turned sour when I saw them do a cool handshake.

"Who's that?" I growled. Did I sound jealous or did I sound jealous?

"That's Xander Aldrick, his best friend. He ranks second in our class after Ivan," Charlie replied.

"Isn't Xander the student who's tutoring you?" I asked, turning towards Charlie, who was staring down the hall with a look in his eyes that I couldn't quite fathom.

"Yeah, that's him." He smiled.

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Chapter 18: I'm Not Jealous

"That'll be two dollars," said the cafeteria lady, handing me a slice of pizza. I rummaged through my pockets for some change but froze when the realization hit me. These weren't my pants. She noticed my hesitation and huffed.

These weren't my pants.

"Do you have the money or not?" asked the cafeteria lady, impatiently drumming her fingers on the counter. I let out a stiff chuckle.

"Sorry, I forgot my pa- I mean, wallet," I said. The students waiting behind me tilted their heads to see what was taking so long, making me even more embarrassed.

"If you can't pay, then you can't get any food," she sighed. "Next!"

"I'll take it," said a husky voice. I squeezed my eyes shut, holding back a groan.

Out of all the people that could have appeared, it just had to be him.

I finally re-opened, turning towards Ivan who handed the lady the money. Xander was standing beside him, stabbing me with a cold stare. I scowled.

What's up with him?

"Thank you!" beamed the cafeteria lady in a completely different tone. Just a few seconds ago, she was glaring at me like I was the biggest nuisance in the world but look at her now, batting her eyes and talking in a shy voice as if she was 18 again.

I watched her hand him the pizza.

"Please come again soon!" she exclaimed. Ivan gave her a small nod and smile, taking the slice of pizza and walking away with Xander.

I quickly followed them, having to jog just to catch up.

"Ivan!" I called, stopping him. I pointed at the pizza in his hand. "That's mine."

He looked at it and then looked back at me and smiled, biting into it. My jaw fell wide open as I stared at him.

"You monster," I gasped under my breath.

"Now it's mine," he winked. Okay, I knew I was supposed to be mad, but he looked like one of those cute guys on a pizza commercial, smiling at me so innocently that it made it hard for me to stay annoyed.

"No, it's not," I huffed stubbornly.

"Remind me, who paid for it?" He smirked.

"I did!" I paused. "Well, I was going to pay for it, but then I forgot that I was wearing your-" I stopped mid-sentence, flickering my eyes towards Xander who stood beside Ivan with his arms crossed over his chest. The last thing I needed was for him to know that I slept at his place. "I forgot my wallet."

"At my house?" Ivan asked smugly. Oh, just scream it to the world, why don't you?

Xander narrowed his eyes at me. You know what they say: Another day, another enemy.

"What are you staring out?" I snapped, turning towards him.

"For someone so small, you sure have a big mouth."

Stay calm, Desmond, stay calm. Be the better man and quietly walk away-

"Oh yeah? And how's the weather up there, Jack and the beanstalk?"

Of course.

Xander's eyes hardened. He took a step forward, his height casting a shadow over me and darkening my entire vision span. In my defense, I wasn't that short; he was just freakishly tall. I had to raise my head to meet his gaze, but he didn't scare me. I've fought boys ten times scarier than him. Heck, I've gone head-to-head with my mom. This? This was nothing.

"Yeesh, do you ever trim your nose hair?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at his nostrils. "There's like an entire forest up there."

Ivan bit his lip, stifling a laugh while Xander reddened.

"Why don't you beat it before I beat you? You're getting on my nerves."

A sardonic grin spread across my face as I slowly raised my right hand, flicking him a finger.

"Well deal with it, bitch."

Xander shoved me back, but before he could do any serious damage, Ivan stepped in between us. It annoyed me how close he stood to Xander. Their arms were almost touching. Why were their arms touching?

"It's just a slice of pizza," Ivan sighed.

No, this wasn't just about a slice of pizza, it was about dignity and pride. Xander and I locked eyes and thus began the staring contest. I sucked in my cheeks, staring hard at him. Water formed in our eyes, and I was tempted to blow in his face to win. Ivan looked up at the ceiling in despair, waiting for the buffoonery to end. I clenched my fists, feeling my eyes itch. I blinked first, and Xander grinned.

"Ha!" he sneered.

I was about to slap him, but Ivan caught my wrist.

"How do you always get yourself into trouble?"

It seemed like a rhetorical question.

"It's called doing what I want," I snapped, pulling away from his grip. "Whatever, keep your dumb pizza and your ugly friend, I don't care."

I stabbed Xander with another glare. "That's right, I called you ugly."

I brushed past Ivan and shoved past Xander. Joke was on me, because his shoulder was as hard as granite, and I almost lost my balance, but I didn't let it show and kept walking with my chin held high.

"Desmond," I heard Ivan say, catching me by the elbow.

"What?" I snapped. He uncurled my fist and slid something into my palm. It was a ten-dollar bill.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you calling me poor?"

"You need money to buy lunch," he reminded me, unfazed by my sour attitude.

"I don't need your money."

As if on cue, my stomach let out a loud growl. Hell, it sounded more like a ferocious roar than a growl. What kind of abominable monster lived down there?

"I don't want it," I mumbled.

"Keep it."

"No, ho."

Ivan took a step forward, his grey eyes sending chills down my spine like a winter breeze.

"Do you want me to hold your hand in front of everyone and take you to the cafeteria lady myself? I'll do it if I have to. You know damn well I will."

I stiffened. I knew he wasn't bluffing because Ivan never bluffed. He could hold my hand in front of the entire school and not give a single damn about what others thought. People were already glancing at us, wondering why the Class Prince was talking to the new student with a bruised up face,

while his jealous best friend shot lasers through his eyes. This would make a great soap opera, Ivory High edition, starring Ivan Moonbitch, Jack the beanstalk, and Desmond Marshmellow.

"Fine, I'll take the money, but don't expect the change."

"You really are something." Ivan sighed, but a smile etched at the corner of his lips as he looked at me, and it felt like everything else around me had become a blur. The people who walked by us became silhouettes, the noises of the cafeteria became inaudible, and the only person I could see was Ivan. He leaned towards me, his lips almost brushing my ear.

"Meet me in the library after lunch," he whispered, before leaving with Xander. A strange feeling warped around my heart, and my fingers tightened around the ten-dollar bill.

Alright, so maybe.

Just maybe.

I liked him a little bit more than I should.

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Chapter 19: A Metamorphose

I was in the library, staring at my textbook while Ivan stared at me, waiting for me to solve the next equation. I didn't know what bothered me most; the students peeping at us or Ivan's intense gaze. I looked up and met his intimidating eyes, quickly dropping my gaze. Definitely Ivan's eyes. I pressed the tip of my pen against the sheet of paper, but I had no clue how to solve the equation. I ran my hand through my hair, tapping my finger against my head, hoping that the universe would miraculously give me the power to solve this damn question. I stiffened when Ivan's knee grazed over mine, which made it even harder for me to concentrate. Thank you, Universe, that was exactly what I needed right now.

"I need help," I finally admitted. Ivan pressed his jaw against his knuckles, studying my face.

"Is it that hard?"

I twitched at the innuendo and regretted asking for help. "Not everyone is born a genius, okay?"

He smiled.

"Do I make you nervous?"

"Not the slightest." I smirked, staring straight into his eyes.

"You realize that your cheeks are red, right?"

I had enough and abruptly stood up, grabbing my notebooks and shoving them into my bag.

"Where are you going?" he asked, looking amused.

"Away from you," I snapped.

"We haven't finished studying."

"Does it look like we're studying?" I asked, raising a brow. He didn't answer. "That's what I thought. This tutor session is over."

"Not until I say so," he said. Who did he think he was? The prince of arrogance?

"Two words, one finger." I grinned, grabbing my bag and turning on my heel to go away.

"You like me that much?" he mused.

I stopped in my steps, snapping my head towards him.

"If you don't, then sit down," he said. I gritted my teeth. My mind was screaming at me to leave, but my pride was telling me to prove him wrong, and my ego always won over my rationality. I sat back down and took out my notebooks, glowering at him.

"You're so stubborn," he chuckled.

"It feels shitty being stuck with you too," I said, giving him the fakest smile I could make. Ivan's ankle touched mine, but this time, he didn't move his leg.

"Your leg," I mumbled.

"What about it?"

"It's touching mine."

"I know." He picked up my pen and began teaching me how to solve the equation. If he wasn't so cruel and twisted, he would have made a brilliant teacher. Oh, who am I kidding, Ivan would be great at anything. We spent around two hours in the library, and we finally took a break.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Happy."

I blinked.

"Who hurt you, child?" I asked, feigning compassion and putting my hand over his. It was only a playful gesture, but Ivan looked down at our hands and raised a brow. I was about to pull away, but he threaded his fingers between mine.

"What are you doing?" I asked, looking around to make sure no one was around. The coast was clear, but that didn't mean I wanted to keep holding his hand. Well, maybe I did. Maybe I liked how our hands fitted nicely together, and how big and warm his palms felt against mine, and... Damn it Desmond, stop enjoying this!

"Let go," I ordered.

"No."

Ivan didn't budge, and I narrowed my eyes.

"Do you always do whatever you want?" I growled.

"Not always." He shrugged.

"I don't believe you."

Ivan smiled, tracing his thumb in circular motions over the back of my hand.

"If I did whatever I wanted, you would be crying by now," he said pensively. "Believe it or not, I'm being patient very you."

"Do you want a pat on the shoulder or a gold sticker for your patience?" I laughed, despite the blush that colored my cheeks.

"Holding my hand will do for now."

I rolled my eyes but failed to stay mad at him. He rested his head on his arm, the same way he did whenever he fell asleep in class. Wait, he wasn't planning on falling asleep while holding my hand, was he?

"You know what I like about you?" Ivan murmured. "Other people try to get close to me for my social status, or out of admiration, no one really likes me for who I am. But you? You hate me for all the same reasons everyone admires me, so if you have feelings for me, I know they're genuine. It's nice knowing that there's one person who likes me for me."

"I told you, I don't have feelings for you."

"Okay."

It irked me how unconvinced he was. Another side of me, one that I didn't want to acknowledge, was glad that he didn't believe me. I let out a quiet sigh and rested my head on the table, facing him. He gave me a small, but sweet smile, and I felt my heart race inside my chest. His eyes were so different in moments like these. The lines on his face softened, and the coldness of his gaze melted away. I wanted to explain how Ivan made me feel, but it seemed impossible to define. There wasn't a singular definition that could explain how I felt, that would exclude more than half the entirety. When I was with him, every fleeting second was a constant metamorphose.

"We should get back to studying," I murmured, but I didn't move or pull away. He looked at me, blinked, and smiled.

"Yeah," he whispered, closing his eyes. "We should."

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Chapter 20: Young and Dumb

I continued to think about Ivan throughout the day. He made it impossible for me to focus in class. Okay, that wasn't completely true. I wouldn't have been able to focus even if I wasn't thinking about him, but that wasn't the point. I couldn't get him out of my mind. What did I like about Ivan? Was it his handsome features? His mysterious and sexy personality? His dark humor that was borderline offensive? How he acted cold and careless, but deep down was kind? And before you knew it, I was listing all his good traits and I couldn't stop.

When we were in English class, my eyes shifted towards him, and his gaze met mine. He gave me a small smile and there went my heart. Thump. Thump. Thump. I looked away before he saw me blush. I couldn't tell what was so special about him. He was just a stupid tall boy, with messy dark hair, and vivid eyes deep enough to drown anyone, so why did my heart feel like it was seconds away from combusting whenever I looked at him? Class ended, and I joined my friends so we could walk home together. We were about to leave school until we noticed that it was raining outside. Trevor stretched his hand, and water dripped from his fingers.

"It's raining," he stated.

"Thank you, captain obvious," I said with an eye roll.

Trevor pushed me into the pouring rain, and I yelped.

"H-Hey!" I cried, running back for shelter.

We began fighting, and Scott pulled us apart.

"I love the rain!" Charlie exclaimed. He was about to prance forward, but someone caught his arm and stopped him.

"You'll get sick," Xander said, stopping him. When did he get here?

"No, I won't," Charlie sulked while Xander adjusted his sweater.

"Yes, you will, and I'll be the one who has to take care of you."

Xander opened his umbrella, and Charlie waved at us before leaving with him. It was impossible not to notice their uncanny height difference. Xander had to be at least three heads taller than little Charlie.

"Can I hold the umbrella?" we heard Charlie ask. Xander handed it to him, but it was too heavy, so Charlie had to hold the base with both hands. He raised it over his head to make sure I was high enough for Xander, but the umbrella tilted to the left, leaving Xander's entire right shoulder exposed to the rain. I expected Xander to react badly, but he said nothing and listened to Charlie chatter about his day.

"What just happened?" I asked as their silhouettes disappeared behind the mist.

"Charlie and Xander are close friends," Scott explained.

How could someone so pure and innocent get along with someone so evil and bitter?

"They live together," Trevor added.

My brows shot up. "They do?"

"Charlie's parents kicked him out of the house when he came out of the closet. They're religious with conservative beliefs. Charlie still struggles with what happened, but Xander's been helping him a lot."

"Is he okay?" I frowned.

"Is anyone in this messed up world ever okay?" Trevor sighed.

Scott and I turned towards with raised brows.

"Sorry, it felt like the right time to say something deep," he chuckled sheepishly. "Anyway, Charlie's been happier ever since he started living with Xander's family. I don't know if he's healed yet, but he's getting better."

I felt grateful to Xander for being there for Charlie.

"Didn't you say you and your mom had an argument?" Trevor asked.

"Yeah," I mumbled, watching the drizzle become heavy rain.

"Are you going home?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" He asked. "What are you going to do if you don't go home?"

"I haven't thought that far yet. My life motto is live in the moment, screw everything else."

"Parents always say things they don't mean, it's like second nature to them."

"That doesn't mean they can say hurtful things."

"No, but they mess up, just like we do."

"Trevor's right. Are you going to spend the rest of your life resenting someone who loves you?" Scott said.

"If she loves me, then why would she hurt me?" I growled. Even to my ears, I sounded like a spoiled child, and I felt like I had no right to talk about being unloved after hearing Charlie's story, but I couldn't neglect the way I felt either.

"Because love isn't always sunshine and rainbows. It's going to hurt, whether it's with friends, family, or a lover, it hurts like hell. We're human, we make mistakes, and we mess up, even me and Scott. Do you think our friendship is perfect? If we're still together today, it's because we love each other unconditionally no matter what. We push our pride aside and make things work. No matter what, we always come back to each other," Trevor said. "Go home and talk things out with your mom. Worst-case scenario, she'll kick you out for being gay."

"I'm not-"

"Gay? We know. It was an example," he laughed, tousling my hair, which reminded me of the way my brother who used to do the same when we were kids.

"We should get going," Trevor said. "Does anyone have an umbrella?"

We simultaneously turned towards Scott.

"What would you two do without me?" he sighed, taking out a bright yellow umbrella from his bag, and popped it open.

"I don't know about Desmond, but I'd be nothing without you," Trevor beamed.

"Don't say that with such a wide smile," Scott grumbled, his cheeks turning pink.

The three of us squeezed under the umbrella, fighting and pushing each other for more room and complaining to the person who was hogging it. Trevor was the first to steal the umbrella, prancing away and leaving us with nothing but the heavy rain over our heads. Scott ran and tackled him to the ground, stealing the umbrella and running away with it. I hooked my foot around his ankle, and he fell into a puddle, allowing me to take the prize.

We continued to fight and laugh, fighting for an umbrella despite already being wet from head to toe. Our laughter filled the damp air, and we chased each other under the rain like the irresponsible, silly teenagers we were.

Chapter 21: Home

I paced back and forth on my front porch, unable to bring myself to knock on the door. A cold gust of wind brushed over me, and I shivered. After fighting and wrestling in the rain, I was soaking wet. Before I could give myself some pep talk, the door opened. My mom must have heard my footsteps. She stared at me, wide-eyed.

"Hey," I croaked, waving at her awkwardly.

Her lips parted, but not a sound came out. I didn't know what shocked her most: her son who returned home after running away, or her son that was as wet as a dog.

"I'm-"

She raised her hand, and I flinched, squeezing my eyes shut and waiting for her to smack me across the face. My lids flung open when I felt her warm arms wrap around me, squeezing me against her.

"Uh, Mom?" I winced.

She pulled me at arm's length, sweeping the hair that stuck to my forehead.

"Do you know how I worried I was? Oh, just look at you, look at all these bruises."

"I've been through worse," I said, smiling sheepishly. Mom narrowed her eyes. I guess that wasn't the most reassuring thing to say.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have run away," I murmured.

"No, I'm the one who should apologize. I should have never said something so terrible."

My eyes fell to my feet, and I felt a nervous knot twist inside my stomach. I knew this wasn't easy for her either.

"We don't have to talk about it," I said.

"Yes, we do," she replied, raising my chin, so I'd look her in the eyes. "Desmond, I am so, so, sorry. I was upset, and I know that doesn't excuse the words I said, but it hurts me whenever you get into fights. It worries me how you always get in trouble, and I'm not just talking about last night. I just... I just don't understand why you would do that to yourself."

"How else am I supposed to get your attention?" I asked with a sad smile, digging my nails into the palm of my hands to direct the pain elsewhere. "I feel as if I can't exist in your eyes otherwise. We all know that I'll never be as great as Arthur. If I can't be the best or recognition for at least trying, then I might as well be good at messing up."

I took in a shaky breath.

"You and dad always praise Arthur and never look at me. You forget that I even exist. I know I'm not what you wanted, but I'm trying. I'm trying my best, and I wish you and dad would know that."

I felt pathetic crying in front of my mom, but I also felt as if I had lifted a heavy burden from my shoulders. She would never know how exhausting being shadowed by a perfect older brother was, and she would never know about the years of how I felt unwanted, unloved, and unappreciated, but that was okay. All I wanted was for her to know that those years existed. My mom pulled me in,

hugging me.

"I compared you to Arthur because I wanted the best for you. I shouldn't have done it that way, it was wrong and cruel of me. I didn't know that it hurt you. I'm sorry, Desmond, I'm so, so, sorry."

She wasn't the only one to blame. Maybe if I had mustered up the courage and told her a few years earlier, then I wouldn't have suffered so much, but talking about my feelings, finding words that matched my emotions without being overwhelmed by them, was hard. Getting scolded and fighting with my fists was easier, but I had to admit that speaking up and communicating was more rewarding, and well worth the pain.

"Of course I know you exist. You're my son," she murmured, wiping away my tears.

"But am I your favorite son?" I asked, making her laugh.

"I love you and your brother equally."

"Bummer, I thought I was your favorite."

She smiled and pulled me at arm's length.

"Do you know how special you are?" she asked.

"That's what every mom says," I said with an eye roll.

"That's how every mom feels," she laughed. "But you're such a rare person to come across Desmond, and I'm not saying that because you're my son. Cross my heart, the universe is so lucky to have someone like you."

I smiled, fighting back the fresh tears. She then slapped my arm, and I yelped in pain.

"Hey, what was that for?!"

"That doesn't give you an excuse to run away and ignore my calls!" she snapped, returning to her usual self. "You're lucky your classmate came to my office to tell me you were okay, or I would have barged into your classroom and dragged you outside in front of your classmates."

"Wait, who went to your office?"

"Ivan Moonrich was kind enough to inform me you were staying at his house."

"That snitch," I gasped.

Mom narrowed her eyes.

"Oh, I mean, yay, I'm so grateful."

"Thank him the next time you see him. It seems like he's taken good care of you. You're even wearing his clothes."

I looked down at the soaked sweater and pants.

"He's probably going to burn these," I mumbled under my breath.

"What?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," I laughed.

"I didn't know you boys were friends."

"We're not," I blurted. She raised a skeptical brow.

"Did you boys perhaps-"

I stopped her before she could continue. "Mom, we are not having this conversation again!"

"He's quite handsome," she pried.

"MOM!"

I bit my lip and squeezed my hands, feeling a new pang of nervousness inside my chest. I hesitated at first. But if not now, then when?

"This is just a hypothesis," I began. "But let's say that I did like a boy. You wouldn't mind?"

I always thought my mom was beautiful, and even more so when she smiled the way she was smiling now. She ran a hand through my hair and leaned in, planting a soft kiss on my forehead.

"Of course I'd still love you. I'd love you no matter what."

I couldn't help but smile. Sure, my mom and I weren't perfect, but we loved each other despite our flaws and mistakes. And as much as I enjoyed staying at Ivan's place and running around in the rain with my friends, there

was something irreplaceable about returning home.

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Chapter 22: I miss you too

After dinner, a shower, and a dry change of clothes, I went up to my room and plopped onto my bed.

"Home sweet home," I exhaled, hugging a pillow tightly against my chest. I reached for my phone and went through my social media. I was watching a funny cat video when I received a message from an unknown number.

Unknown number: Are you home?

Me: Stranger danger rule number one, don't talk to strangers.

Unknown number: Strangers don't cuddle in bed.

I twitched. It was Ivan, no doubt about it. I hesitated at first, but I saved his number into my phone.

Me: We didn't cuddle.

Ivan: No, I simply wrapped my arms around you while you snuggled against my chest. Definitely didn't cuddle.

I felt my face turn scarlet and furiously started typing back.

Me: It was unintentional cuddling. I hug things when I sleep, okay?

Ivan: I'll keep that in mind :)

That smug little...

I yelped in surprise when my phone started ringing, panicking when his name appeared on my screen. Phone calls stressed me out. It had to be the most socially awkward activity to exist.

"Ivan?" I squeaked, finally picking up.

"Hey." Ivan's voice didn't sound altered over the phone. He still had his deep, smooth voice that I could listen to all day. But I wouldn't because that would be gay.

"Why did you call?"

"I missed you," he murmured in a voice so sweet that my face immediately blushed. He let out a soft chuckle. "I'm kidding. You didn't take that seriously, did you?"

I twitched, slamming my face against my pillow and scolding myself for being so naïve.

"Of course not," I snapped, trying to hide my disappointment. "How did you get my number?"

"I hacked into your phone."

"You what?! I have a password!"

"Only an idiot like you would use 1234 as their password."

"How dare you disrespect me like that?" I pulled my phone away from my face and went to the "settings" button.

"You're changing it, aren't you?" he mused.

"Begone thought."

His laugh made my heart melt.

"If you have nothing important to say, I'm hanging up."

"Go on, I dare you," he said in a taunting tone. His confidence irked me. Who did he think he was? Did he think I wouldn't hang up on him just because he dared me? Was he challenging me?

"You don't intimidate me."

"Then hang up," he incited nonchalantly.

I pursed my lips, suddenly doubtful. "What are you going to do if I do?"

"We'll find out."

"Fine weather we have today, don't you think?" I said, changing the subject and diverting my attention towards the window. It was pitch dark outside. This was why I never answered phone calls.

"Lovely." It sounded as if he was trying not to laugh.

"Hey, did you tell my mom I was staying at your place yesterday?"

"Are you upset that I did?"

"No, I just want to know why you told her."

"Because she would worry, and I didn't want to get arrested for allegedly kidnapping you."

If Ivan hadn't told my mom I was with

him I didn't think we would have reconciled like we did today. Deep down, I felt grateful.

"You annoy me," I said, my version of 'thank you.'

"I'm glad I do."

"Why?"

"It means you think about me."

My heart jumped inside my chest. Why did he have to be such a flirt?

"Ivan, can I ask you something?"

"You already are."

"Have you ever tried getting in touch with your parents? You could call them and see how they're doing."

There was a pause, and for a second, I thought he wouldn't answer.

"We only talk once in a blue moon. They call me now and then to check if I'm alive, but what I do and how I'm doing is unnecessary details to them."

Despite Ivan's popularity at school, I felt as if he was by himself. He was physically there, but a part of him seemed absent almost empty as if he self-consciously isolated himself from others. Was it because he grew up with little to no love from his parents? Then again, how could someone be affectionate if they've never received affection in the first place?

"Don't you feel lonely without them?"

"I don't know. It's been a while since I've felt anything."

My brows creased. I knew how scary it was to be alone, and I knew what it felt like to be neglected by parents, how frustratingly painful it was. You felt worthless; you blamed yourself; you wondered what was wrong with you and why you weren't enough. I knew how much it hurt. Ivan and I coped with our problems differently. Ivan dissociated himself from his feelings, while I amplified mine, but the pain was the same. It had to be.

"You have me." The words came out of my mouth before I could stop myself. "You act cold, but deep down, you're thoughtful and caring. Others don't know that side of you because you rarely show it, but I've seen it, I've felt it, I know it. You're not alone, Ivan, you..." I took in a tight breath. "You have me. We sit beside each other five times a week, we pass each other in the halls, and you even have my number. Reach out to me whenever you need someone to talk to, I'll be there for you."

I couldn't imagine how traumatizing and sad it must have been for Ivan to not have a single parent by his side. I had my mom, my brother, sometimes my dad, but Ivan had no one.

"Does that mean you care about me?"

"You're a good person. Slightly twisted in the mind, but a good person."

He chuckled, but there was something sad about it. "I'm not."

"What?"

"I'm not a good person, Des."

"Yes, you are. I'm complimenting you for once and you dare reject it?"

"Desmond." The way he said my name in a serious tone made the hairs on my arms stand. "There's something I have to tell you. I-"

I jumped as the sound of glass shattering cut him off, followed by a distressed voice. Ivan swore under his breath. He even made vulgar words sound lovely.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"I have to go. A diner broke a plate."

"Yeah, of course," I frowned, but my mind was still lingering on his previous words. What did he want to tell me?

"Are you free tomorrow afternoon? You could come to my place."

"To study?" I asked nervously.

"Sure."

"I'm free at four if that works for you."

"Four is perfect. Oh, and Desmond?"

"Yeah?"

"I meant it when I said I missed you." And he hung up.

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Chapter 23: Charlie's Secret

The next morning, I felt invincible. My bruises were healing, my mom and I were on good terms, and the phone call with Ivan made me feel over the moon.

"Charlie!" I exclaimed, joining him at his lockers. "What's with the sunglasses?"

"Oh, these?" he laughed nervously, self-consciously bringing his fingers to his shades. "I didn't get much sleep. I wanted to hide my dark circles."

"You don't need to hide them. Everyone here looks like a zombie."

And sadly, it was true. We sacrificed hours of sleep to study for tests, pulling all-nighters and drinking coffee like adults. Who cared about mental health when we could get good grades?

"I'll take them off later." He shrugged.

Charlie acted strangely for the rest of the day. I knew he couldn't always be bright and bubbly, but something didn't feel right, so I asked the last person I wanted to talk to.

"Xander," I called, approaching the giant. He turned towards me, stabbing with a glare. "I don't know if you remember me, but I'm the guy who called you a bitch yesterday. My name is Desmond."

I gave out my hand as a friendly gesture, but he didn't flinch and glared at it as if I was offering him a handful of shit.

"Alrighty," I mumbled, shaking my own hand to save myself the embarrassment.

"Are you looking for a fight?" he asked, his dark, chestnut eyes narrowed to slits.

"No, I'm here to converse with you."

That's right, I could use fancy words.

"I was wondering if something happened to Charlie."

His nose wrinkled. "Why are you asking me?"

"You two live together."

"Look, Dominic," he sighed. Dominic? "Stop sticking your nose in other people's business."

"Unfortunately, that's kind of my specialty."

He ignored me and walked away.

"Hey, where are you going?" I shouted, pacing after him. Why were his legs so long? "I just want to make sure that my friend is okay."

"He's doing great," he answered flatly. I ran in front of him and blocked his path.

"What's your problem? I normally do something stupid before someone hates me, but what have I done to you?"

"You really don't know?" he sneered.

"Why do you think I'm asking, birdbrain?"

Xander blinked at me in surprise.

"Ivan didn't tell you?"

My stomach twisted into a nervous knot. "Tell me what?"

"I guess you aren't as important to him as I thought." He smirked. He pushed past me, but I ran after him and blocked his path again.

"I will knock you out if you don't cut that out," he hissed.

"And I'll beat you to a pulp." I glanced at his firm body and gulped. "Well, I'll try to."

My lips were itching to ask him about Ivan. Was Ivan hiding something? Was that what he wanted to tell me last night before a plate broke? But why would something that concerned Ivan make Xander hate me? I wanted to ask, but I knew that Xander wouldn't be generous enough to answer two questions. I'd be lucky if he answered one of them. Charlie was a priority.

"I need to know if Charlie is okay. I care about him."

"Then stop caring."

"I can't!" I shouted hoarsely. "I can't stop caring! Charlie is my friend, and I'm not going to stand here and do nothing when he's obviously not okay. Does anyone have their shit together? No, bitch face, we're all faking it until we make it, but that doesn't mean we have to go through it alone."

Charlie was the first friend I made in Ivory High. We failed classes together, walked to the teacher's office side-by-side, he always cheered me up whenever I was down. He was small, but boy, did he have spunk. He could light up an entire room with just his smile. That being said, he was also the type to act okay when he wasn't. Xander ran a hand through his hair, letting out a tired sigh as if listening to me talk was enough to exhaust him.

"Before coming to school this morning, we stopped at his house to get some of his belongings," Xander said. "He saw his parents, and they said some nasty things. He didn't get any of his stuff."

"Why didn't you help him?"

"You think I didn't want to? Charlie told me to wait in the car, he said he wouldn't forgive me if I followed him into his house. What was I supposed to do? You think it didn't piss me off when I saw him running out of the house crying? I know I should have gone with him, but all I could do was give him a stupid pair of sunglasses," he growled. I've seen Xander angry. It was the only side I've seen of him but the anger that radiated around him right now felt different. It felt genuine.

"He'll probably go back this afternoon," he sighed.

"What about his parents? Won't they be there?"

"Of course they will, but he needs his stuff. He can't wear my sweaters all the time, they don't fit him. Besides, he doesn't like it when I buy him new clothes," he said, which was when I understood why Charlie always wore oversized clothes. They weren't his, but Xander's.

"Will you go with him?"

He shook his head.

"I have a swimming competition. I'd ditch if it was an individual medley, but tonight's a team race," He clenched his jaw, averting his gaze as if he felt uncomfortable. "His parents can get violent sometimes, and not just verbally. If you have nothing better to do, which seems to be the case, why don't you do something useful and make sure Charlie gets his stuff back?"

I blinked in surprise. Was he asking me for a favor?

"I would, but I don't think he'd let me follow him to his house." I frowned. "He won't even tell me why he's sad. He'd never let me go with him."

"Isn't that what you do?"

"What?"

"You do what you want no matter what others say."

I didn't know if that was a compliment or an insult. Xander walked past me, but stopped, glancing over his shoulder and meeting my gaze once more.

"And Derek?"

"What?" I snapped but failed to sound irritated. He looked at me, hesitant at first.

"I'd set boundaries with Ivan if I were you," he finally said.

My chest tightened. "What do you mean?"

"He'll break your heart."

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Chapter 24: Because We Can

"Xander said that?" Scott asked when I finished telling them what happened.

"I'm going to kill Charlie's parents," Trevor growled, slamming his locker door so hard that it bounced back and hit him in the face. He howled in pain. Scott and I ignored him and continued down the hall.

"Do you think we should talk to Charlie?" I asked, casually continuing our conversation.

Scott shook his head. "He'll only avoid us more than he already is. He doesn't want to be a burden."

"But he's not a burden." I frowned.

"I know, but that's how he feels when he's not okay," Scott murmured. Trevor caught up to us, pinching his injured nose.

"So how are we going to help Charlie get his stuff back?" he asked.

"We could follow him home without him knowing, but that's a terrible idea," I joked.

"That's a brilliant idea!" Trevor beamed.

"I don't know," Scott intervened. "It's like we're stalking him."

"It's called investigating," Trevor corrected him.

"Charlie wouldn't like it either way."

"I'd rather have him be mad at us than see him get hurt. Don't you remember the part where Xander said his parents were abusive? What if they hurt my baby? Nu-uh, not happening."

I nibbled on my lower lip, considering the terrible idea.

"We could follow him home and hide outside his house."

"I don't know, this doesn't feel right," Scott insisted. "We're invading his privacy."

"I'm going. I can't stand Charlie getting hurt," Trevor said, already deciding.

"I'm with Trev," I murmured.

"What about you? Are you in or not?" Trevor asked. Scott looked at us and knew that we'd go with or without his permission. He let out a sigh,

finally giving in.

"Who else is going to stop you two from doing anything stupid?"

"Aw, Scott," Trevor whimpered, pulling him in and roughly rustling his hair. So it was decided. Once school was over, we would follow and not stalk Charlie to his house to make sure he collected his things safe and sound. I looked to the side and saw Ivan down the hall. My face turned pale, remembering that I had promised to go to his house after school. I didn't know what to do. I had made plans with Ivan first, but I couldn't turn a blind eye to Charlie's situation. He'd understand, wouldn't he?

Trevor leaned towards me and whispered, "You're staring at him again."

"I-I'm not staring."

"Staring," he sang in a high-pitched tone. I pushed him away.

"Is it okay if I join you guys later?" I asked.

"Where are you-"

"Shhh, don't ask questions," Trevor said, pressing his finger against Scott's lips. He looped his arm around Scott's and pulled him away, but not before giving me a thumbs up and a wink. I went up to Ivan, squeezing my clammy hands.

"Hey," I said.

Ivan turned towards me and smiled, which made me feel guiltier for what I was about to say. I ran a hand through my hair before letting it fall to the nape of my neck.

"You look nervous," he said, his smile slowly fading.

"About this afternoon," I began slowly. "I don't think I can make it."

His liquid grey eyes hardened into armored steel.

"Something important suddenly came up," I quickly said.

"Like what?"

"It's... It's complicated." I wanted to tell him, but I didn't want to betray Charlie. "We can reschedule for tomorrow, can't we?"

"Forget it," he growled. He walked away, and I ran after him.

"Why are you mad?" I demanded. "I have a good reason."

He stopped so abruptly I almost slammed into him.

"And I'm not a good reason?"

"That's not what I meant. Why can't we just meet another day?"

"For you to throw me aside when it's convenient for you again? Thanks, but I'm good."

I felt a pang of guilt in my chest. "Ivan..."

"In the end, you're just like him." His harsh and curt tone slashed through me. He walked away, leaving me to bleed.

'Him'? Who was 'him'? I watched his figure recede, feeling a distance between us. I had a desperate desire to run after him, but I didn't. I had the ominous feeling that if I took a step forward and ran after him, that if I crossed the invisible line that separated Ivan and the rest of the world, there would be nothing but regret waiting on the other side.

When school ended, Trevor and Scott sent me a message telling me their whereabouts. I left the school gates and found them hiding behind some bushes.

"Shhh," Trevor hushed hastily when I crouched down beside him. "We're waiting for Charlie. Look, he's here!"

We peered over the bushes, watching Charlie leave the gates. Once he was far enough down the street, we abandoned our hiding place to follow him. We kept our distance, but after ten minutes of walking, Charlie stopped in his steps. My eyes widened when Charlie's head turned around. I instantly jumped behind a trash can while Trevor and Scott hugged each other, digging their faces into the other's shoulders, huddling like two penguins in THE MIDDLE OF THE SIDEWALK.

Ladies and gentlemen, the elite of our nation. It took everything in me not to groan in despair. My eyes darted towards Charlie, who, to my surprise, continued down his path without thinking much of the two idiots hugging each other on the streets.

"Is he gone?" Trevor whispered; his face still stuffed against Scott's shoulder. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Yes, Trevor, he's gone."

He pulled away and let out a sigh of relief.

"Whew, that was a close one. Desmond, you should have chosen a better hiding spot. You almost blew our cover."

I opened my mouth to say something but changed my mind.

"Come on, guys, we're losing him," said Scott, hurrying away. I knew I wasn't imagining it. He was blushing.

We followed Charlie for about fifteen minutes before he stopped in front of a house. He walked up the porch and took out his keys, unlocking the door and disappearing. Meanwhile, the three of us hid behind a tree.

"So, now what?" Trevor asked.

"I guess we wait until he comes out," I said.

"What if I have to pee?"

"I told you to go to the bathroom before we left school," Scott sighed.

"I have a small bladder, you know that," Trevor whined, hopping on one foot and then the other. It was almost like watching two siblings bickering. Almost. The only difference was that one of them was infatuatedly in love with the other. How did I not realize earlier? The way Scott's eyes lingered on Trevor a beat too long, how he blushed whenever he received a compliment from him, how he smiled in a way that he did with no one else. Scott was in love with Trevor. Did Trevor know? I glanced at him as he continued to complain about his bowel problems. Of course not, Trevor was as dense as a brick. There was no way he would know.

A loud crashing noise came from inside Charlie's house, followed by shouting voices. Trevor bolted to the house before we could stop him. Scott groaned, but wherever Trevor went, he also went, so he ran after him, and I followed them. Shattered glass and toppled furniture were on the floor.

"I told you to never come here again!" yelled a man. The voice came from inside the living room, but Scott caught Trevor's arm in the hallway before he could barge in.

"Dad, I-I just want my things back," Charlie stuttered. "They're in my room, I'll leave as soon as I get them."

"Nothing in this house belongs to you!" he shouted. "I told you to leave this morning, didn't I? There's no way in Hell that I'd let a fag live under my roof!"

"Liam, please," we heard a woman's voice. His mother, no doubt. "Charlie just wants his things back."

"He can find new ones with the rest of his kind," growled Mr. Wimbrow. The rest of his kind? Was he seriously treating Charlie as if he were a different species?

"Dad-"

"Don't call me that! You are not my son! No cock sucker is a son of mine!" he screamed.

"Oh, that does it," Trevor snarled, pulling up his sleeves.

"We can't go in there without a plan," Scott hissed, keeping his voice low.

"The plan is to kick ass," Trevor argued. Scott shook his head.

"I'll help Charlie get his stuff. You and Desmond distract his parents."

Trevor and I looked at each other before turning back towards Scott with a nod. We went into the living room, revealing ourselves. Charlie and his

parents turned towards us in surprise. His dad's face was red from yelling so much, while Charlie's face turned as pale as a sheet of paper.

"Put your hands in the air!" Trevor ordered, pulling out a finger gun. I mentally groaned. But his plan miraculously worked. Trevor's decoy was enough to distract his parents, and Scott slid past them, pulling Charlie out of the living room.

"Where's your stuff?" I heard him ask as they ran down the hallway.

"Upstairs."

Charlie's dad was about to run after them, but Trevor and I blocked the way out.

"You shall not pass," Trevor said, spreading his arms as if he was Gandalf. It didn't help that he purposely spoke in a hoarse voice to enhance the resemblance.

"Who are you two?" Mr. Wimbrow scowled.

"Charlie's friends," I replied before Trevor could say anything stupid.

"Are you like Charlie? You two are like Charlie, aren't you?"

"What? Cock suckers?" Trevor sneered.

Mr. Wimbrow pointed an accusing finger at us.

"You need to confess to your sins! Everything you do is wrong! It's against human nature! It's an abomination to humanity!"

"You know what a real abomination is?!" Trevor angrily shouted back. "How a father can't even accept his son for who he is. Charlie is your family!"

"He is a sinner, that's what he is!" Mr. Wimbrow snapped back. "I won't accept it!"

"Well, I hope you can find peace in that crippling close-minded head of yours because you won't find any of it here. Welcome to the twenty-first century, where people can like whoever the fuck they want!"

They continued shouting at each other. When Mr. Wimbrow tried to push past us, Trevor scared him away by puckering his lips trying to kiss him. Mr. Wimbrow shrieked like a little girl and made a cross with his fingers as if he was trying to exorcise an evil spirit from Trevor's body. After what felt like an eternity, Charlie and Scott came downstairs with luggage. We were about to leave, but Mr. Wimbrow came back with a metal bat. My eyes widened when he raised it at Scott, but before I could stop him, Trevor jumped in and pushed Scott aside, taking the hit instead. The loud 'crack' followed by a cry of pain made me flinch.

"Trevor!" Scott cried in horror.

"I'm fine. Go, just go!" he winced, pushing us forward despite the blood dripping down his face. The four of us ran out the door, ignoring the insults and shouts.

"Never come back here again, Charlie!" Mr. Wimbrow shouted, shaking his bat in the air victoriously. Trevor's blood that stained the metal bat glistened under the sun, and I felt sick. Charlie stopped at the wooden fence, clenching his fists when he turned towards his dad. Tears streamed down his face, but he had never looked braver than he did now.

"I wouldn't come back even if you begged."

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Chapter 25: "Kiss me"

After we escaped, we took Trevor to the closest hospital. They sent him into a medical room, and the doctors told us to go home while they took care of him, but Scott refused to listen, saying that he'd stay. It was the first time I've seen him raise his voice at an adult before. Some nurses threatened to call security, but even then, Scott said that he wouldn't leave until he knew that Trevor was okay.

Charlie and I convinced him to leave the hospital with us. The same night, I received a call from Trevor. He sounded the same as usual, which I suppose was a good sign. He said that he had a minor skull fracture emphasizing the 'minor' so I wouldn't worry. Fortunately, he suffered no brain damage, but he had to stay at the hospital for another week.

The next day, I found Scott crying by himself in the boys' bathroom during recess. No, crying was an understatement. He was sobbing. He blamed himself, saying that it was his fault that Trevor got hurt. I tried to tell him otherwise, but he refused to listen. Scott, who was the most reasonable out of all four of us, refused to be rational. Ever since then, he wasn't himself. I saw him bump into a trash can and apologize to it as if it were an actual person. Without Trevor by his side, Scott was an empty shell, only half of what he used to be.

Days passed, and Charlie was still avoiding us like the plague. Forced smiles and slumped shoulders replaced the bright, bubbly demeanor. I almost regretted interfering that day, but convinced myself that something worse could have happened if we hadn't. Once Trevor was out of the hospital, everything would return to normal, and the four of us would go back to being friends. At least, that was what I hoped.

Even Ivan was ignoring me. After our argument, he wouldn't spare me a glance. I tried talking to him, but he acted like I didn't exist. I wanted to text him, but whenever I typed him a message, I'd overthink and lose my confidence to press send. I knew I was making excuses, but I was scared. The cold prince had returned, and the walls to his tower of self-isolation only thickened after what happened.

The bell rang, and my stomach knotted. It was now or never. I turned towards him, but he had already left. I ran out of the classroom, calling his name.

Alright, Desmond, it's now or never.

"Ivan!"

I knew he had heard me. I caught his arm as he was about to turn around the corner.

"What?" he growled.

"Are you still mad at me?" I demanded.

"No."

Yup, he was definitely still mad at me.

"You already passed your redos, what else do you want from me?" he muttered.

"Well," I mumbled, shifting my eyes to the side as I searched for something to say. What did I want from him? "I... I don't know, it's just that you're ignoring me and it's really starting to get on my nerves."

"And why should I care?"

"Because-" I stopped. I miss talking to you. "It just doesn't feel right leaving things like this. Look, I know I bailed on you last minute but I had a good reason!"

"Oh?" he mused, raising an unimpressed brow. "And why was that?"

My eyes fell to the floor. No matter how badly I wanted Ivan back, I couldn't betray Charlie. "I can't tell you."

"Right."

"Why are you so upset?"

"I'm possessive to a fault," he said, his eyes hardening on mine. "What's mine is mine. I don't share."

My fists tightened. "I don't belong to you."

"Then why are you standing in front of me begging for me to take you back?"

"I'm not."

"Have you seen the look in your eyes, Desmond?" he asked. My spine straightened when he said my name. "You can try to persuade me I'm wrong, but I've told you before, you're an open book. You don't want to admit your feelings because you're afraid."

I knew that Ivan could hurt me, that getting attached to someone like him was dangerous. He could be sweet at one moment, but he could also snip

me out of his life in an instant. Where would that leave me? Heartbroken, that's where. He was a risk, so why him? Why was I drawn towards the ruthless boy, the one who had smug grins and flirtatious manners, the one with a sad past and trust issues, and the one who constantly challenged me?

He left, and in a moment of panic, I blurted, "I'll do whatever you want"

He turned to leave but I stopped him again.

"Wait," I said, grabbing his arm and stopping him once more. I tried not to be impressed by how strong his arms felt and slowly looked up towards him, flinching at his icy cold gaze. "I'll make it up to you or something, just don't be mad at me anymore."

"Make it up to me?" He paused, the sudden smirk that grew on his face making my body stiffen. "Then kiss me."

His husky voice with a sexual undertone echoed into my ears as I stood there, blinking blankly as I tried to process what he just said.

"What?" I asked dumbfoundedly, wondering if this was some kind of joke. He took a step closer towards me, making me take in a sharp breath as my back hit the lockers behind, the only thing keeping a distance between us being my hands that were pushed against his rock hard chest. Damn it, why does he have to have such a gorgeous body?

"Ever heard of personal space?" I hissed.

"Never," the cheeky, sadist chimed. "So?"

"So what?" I demanded, anxiously looking to the side to make sure that no one else was in the halls. It seemed as if everyone else had already gone to their next classes meaning that we were the only ones here, but I didn't know if that was a good thing or bad.

"Hey, eyes on me," he grunted, turning my face back towards his. We locked eyes and I could feel the heat flush to my cheeks, but being the competitive guy I was, I refused to be the one to look away first. "So are you going to make things up to me and kiss me?"

"Feelings for you?" I scoffed. "Oh hoe, you've got it all wrong," I snorted. "As if I'd catch feelings for someone as obnoxious and arrogant as you!"

"Are you just saying that because you're in denial?" He smiled, making me twitch in annoyance.

"No!" I exclaimed a bit too quickly and loudly. I held back a groan, clicking my tongue as I pushed him away. "Right, let's just get things straight between us because I am straight. I don't date boys, I only like girls

so if you think that I'm attracted to you and if you actually think that I'm going to kiss you, then you are dead wrong."

"So you're scared to kiss me because you're afraid to find out that you're actually not as straight as you thought you were?" he mused, decrypting my sentence enrobed in pride.

"No!" I hissed, feeling my face turn even redder.

"Then kiss me. Prove that there's been nothing between us, that we're just two silly boys pressing our lips together, and that it's nothing more than flesh against flesh, skin against skin. No emotions, no passion, no desire, prove me wrong."

I glared at him, gritting my teeth as I tried to think of something to say. How did it go from me trying to apologise to him to me trying to prove my sexuality?!

"You're being ridiculous," I muttered.

"At least I'm being honest."

I stiffened. For some reason, my eyes couldn't help but trail towards his rosy red lips, gulping as I felt the sudden desire to lean in and kiss him.

Wait, no! You don't want to kiss him, what are you thinking Desmond?! You're a guy, he's a guy, there's no way you want to kiss him!...Right? I mean, he clearly doesn't have boobs and he definitely doesn't have a vajayjay, so why are you actually attracted to him? And why in the world do you feel the urge to actually want to kiss him?!

"Well, if you're too scared-"

"I'm not scared!" I protested but frowned as Ivan took a step back.

"You keep telling yourself that," he chuckled shortly. "I'll see you around, Des."

As he turned around to leave, my body and mouth decided to have a mind of their own.

"Fuck it," I growled, grabbing his arms and leaning on the tip of my toes, slamming my lips against his.

I was about to pull away as soon as our lips touched, but Ivan had a different idea. He wrapped his big hands around my waist and pulled me against his broad chest, pushing his tongue against mine.

The kiss wasn't innocent, but passionate and demanding. His tongue pressed against the seam of my lips, and I gave him access. His tongue swirled around mine, and heat rushed to my waist. I loved it. I loved his scent, his touch, his warmth, I loved how his hands were strong but gentle,

how mine got lost in his thick, lustrous hair, how our bodies melted into one. A whimper escaped my throat when he bit my wet lip, licking it once, before kissing me again. My eyes widened when I felt Ivan's knee slide in between my legs.

He raised it and grazed over my bulge. I immediately pushed him away, glaring at him as I panted for oxygen. Ivan's messy dark curls fell over his forehead.

He was breathing just as heavily as I was, the sounds of his breaths sounding sexier than they should.

"That wasn't part of the deal," I growled angrily, hoping that he didn't notice my boner.

"You getting hard also wasn't part of the deal," he pointed out. Yup, he definitely noticed.

Before I could deny it, he put his hand against the locker, face only inches away from mine as he used his other hand to cup my entire thing. My eyes widened in shock, taking in a sharp breath from the gentle pressure and warmth of his paw, my knees starting to buckle as I clutched onto him for support. It took everything I had to hold back a moan, biting onto my lower lip as I felt his index finger slowly trace up my bulge, bottom up.

And that's when he gave it a small squeeze, making me moan in pleasure. My body stiffened in horror at the noise that I just made while Ivan's blinked at me, raising his brows as he let out a whistle.

"Now that was sexy," he smirked, a playful grin dancing on the tip of his lips as he looked at me with those intimidating grey eyes of his. He leaned in for another kiss but I knew that I had to get out of here before it was too late, quickly pushing him away.

"I-" But since I couldn't think straight, I had no idea what to say which is probably why I blurted a, "Go to hell," before storming away as quickly as I could, my face as bright as a tomato and my heart pounding against my chest as if it was about to pounce out any second now.

"Oh, and you're forgiven!" he chirped as if it wasn't obvious enough. He was messing with me, that smug fool was messing with me. I flicked a finger over my shoulder and heard him burst into laughter. He blessed the halls with a soft, hearty melody that came from deep within. It was impossible. He was impossible. There was nothing about him I could hate.

I forced a smile, flicking him a finger. "How about no?"

A chuckled escaped his lips as he leaned in towards me, his lips brushing against my ears and his breath that danced against my skin sending chills down my spine. "You know, the more you try to resist and deny your feelings for me, the more I want to tease you," he whispered huskily.

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Chapter 26: Prick & the Four Musketeers

I had gotten over most of the shock of yesterday's events and went about the rest of my day as ordinarily as I could. I got off at my bus stop and walked the rest of the way to school, stuffing my hands in my jacket pockets when a chilly breeze suddenly hit. My brows furrowed when I felt something brush against my fingertips. I thought it was some old tissues I had forgotten to throw out, but when I hovered it over the nearest trash can, I stopped quickly with wide eyes.

Did my broke ass find a five-dollar bill in my pocket? Was this a gift from Heaven? I felt like I had won the lottery and thought of all the things I could buy. Candy for Charlie? A book for Scott? A pair of cool socks for Trevor? But my eyes stopped at the florist shop across the street. Or maybe... I vigorously shook my head. What was I thinking? As if I'd use my precious five dollars on that douchebag. Nope, not a chance.

A little later in the morning...

"Dude, why are you carrying around a plant?" Trevor asked, who had finally returned to school.

"I bought it this morning."

"Yeah, but why did you buy a cactus? It's so ugly."

"Don't insult Prick like that!" I snapped defensively. Trevor gave me a blank look in return.

"Who now?"

"Prick," I grumbled. Trevor stared at me before bursting into laughter, clutching his stomach as he cackled.

"Prick? You named your cactus Prick?" he wheezed, slapping his knee. Blotches of red patched my cheeks. I had no excuse why I named Ivan's cactus, much like how I had no excuse why I bought him one.

"Whatever, just stop laughing, you sound like a dying camel."

Trevor giggled but choked on his saliva. He urged me to hit his back, but I ignored his demand for aid and walked away with my chin held high. When he finished being dramatic, he caught up to me.

"I almost died," he noted.

"Speaking of death, how are you feeling?" I asked.

"I've had a couple of headaches, but nothing serious. You need more than a metal bat to take down this bad boy." He grinned, tapping the side of his head with his knuckles.

"You cracked your skull," I deadpanned.

"But did I die though?" He grinned, wriggling his thick brows. I rolled my eyes but couldn't help but smile. I had missed his goofiness. School hadn't been the same without him.

"How are things between you Scott?" I asked. and his smile faltered, and he ran a hand through his hair, looking straight ahead.

"Not good. We got into a rough fight the other day, and things didn't end well."

"He went to the hospital to visit you?" I asked keenly. When I went to visit Trevor in the hospital, he had told me that Scott wasn't answering his calls and that he hadn't visited him once.

"Hm? Oh, no, I snuck out of the hospital," he said sheepishly. My brows shot up and he shrugged. "I had to see him."

"Do you want to talk about what happened or...?"

bit and tell each other what's wrong?"

None of them answered, and I exhaled loudly. If they wouldn't talk, then I would.

"I'm sorry," I said, turning towards Charlie. "I'm sorry for following you into your house without your permission. I know this doesn't justify my acts, but I was worried about you, and I was scared that you'd get hurt. I'm sorry."

I turned towards Trevor and Scott.

"That's right, I'm sorry. If you two want to apologize to Charlie, speak up and do it yourselves."

"Desmond's right, he shouldn't apologize for us," Scott said. "I'm sorry too. We should have talked to you before doing anything."

"I tried to warn them," Trevor spoke up, raising his hands in innocence. "But neither of them would listen to me."

Scott and I shot him a dark glare, and he squirmed.

"Oh, alright," he sighed. "I was the one who encouraged them to follow the plan. I'm sorry, Charlie."

He shook his head. "Nah, it's fine. It'll blow over soon, don't worry."

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than me, but I didn't press any further. We continued to chat and laugh, but I spotted Scott and Charlie from across the hall.

"Come on, let's go," Trevor mumbled darkly. I grabbed his arm and dragged him towards them.

"Okay, the four of us need to talk things out," I declared. "How much longer is this going to last? Can't we all man up a bit and tell each other what's wrong?"

None of them answered, and I exhaled loudly. If they wouldn't talk, then I would.

"I'm sorry," I said, turning towards Charlie. "I'm sorry for following you into your house without your permission. I know this doesn't justify my acts, but I was worried about you, and I was scared that you'd get hurt. I'm sorry."

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"Oh, alright," he sighed. "I was the one who encouraged them to follow the plan. I'm sorry, Charlie."

Charlie looked at us, and his lips quivered. He burst into tears, wrapping his arms around me and crying harder.

"Wait, don't cry," Trevor said, starting to panic. "Why are you crying? Is it because of Desmond's ugly plant? It's okay, I want to cry too."

I hit his arm, and Trevor yelped. Charlie started stuttering words, but he was crying so hard we couldn't understand him. Trevor patted his pockets and pulled out a used tissue. Scott slapped it away and handed Charlie a brand new one.

"Show off," Trevor huffed under his breath.

"I should be the one apologizing to you guys," Charlie said in a shaky voice. "I'm sorry if my dad said mean things to you guys, and I'm sorry Trevor that you got hurt."

"Ah, it's fine, I got a free exorcism thanks to your daddy. My soul has been replenished and cleansed, I feel like a newborn man." Trevor winked. Charlie

giggled, rubbing his pink eyes.

"I didn't avoid you guys because I was mad. It was because I was embarrassed and ashamed. You shouldn't have had to witness all of that." Charlie looked as if he was about to cry again.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," Scott murmured.

"He said that it was unnatural and an abomination to humanity," Charlie whimpered. "But I can't help the way I feel, I can't change who I am. I like boys and only boys. I want to kiss them and hug them and be hugged and be kissed. I promise I'm not hurting anyone. I'm not forcing anyone to be like me, I'm not.

It saddened me how Charlie felt the need to explain himself. He buried his face into his hands, his shoulders shaking.

"Is it so wrong to be different? Why can't they accept me for who I am?" he choked. And that hit too close to home.

"Hey, can I tell you something? There are going to be lots of people who come and go in your life. Some will need to explain himself. He buried his face into his hands, his shoulders shaking.

"Is it so wrong to be different? Why can't they accept me for who I am?" he choked. And that hit too close to home.

"Hey, can I tell you something? There are going to be lots of people who come and go in your life. Some will stay by your side while others will leave you. It's unfair, I know, but if you can't change the game, change the players. Find the people who love you for who you are, and if they can't see how special you are, it's their loss. Don't waste your tears on them."

"Desy," he sniffled, hugging me tightly. I smiled, gently caressing his hair. I looked up and furrowed my brows.

"Trevor, are you crying?" I asked.

"I-I'm not crying, you are," he said, rubbing his eyes. Scott was quiet but offered Trevor a tissue. He took it and loudly blew into it. Charlie giggled and smiled that contagious toothy smile of his, and everything felt right again.

Chapter 27: Betrayal

I walked around school the entire time with Prick in my hands, waiting for the right moment to give it to Ivan, but he was always asleep or with bitch-face Xander. And before you knew it, school was over. I walked out of the school gates, disappointed in myself.

Whatever. Who cares? It's just a dumb plant.

I looked down at Prick and frowned.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it," I quickly apologized.

"You talk to plants now?" I heard someone chuckle. I spun around, and my eyes widened when I saw Ivan walk towards me with his bag slung over one shoulder, looking effortlessly perfect. I pressed my lips tightly together, and he laughed. As if he could read my mind, he said, "Relax, Des, I won't kiss you." There was a pause. "Unless you want me to."

"Fuck off."

I pivoted on my heel and walked away, but he casually tagged along.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Walking you to your bus stop." He smiled sweetly.

"How do you know I take the bus?"

"I always drive past the bus station and sometimes see you waiting there."

"Oh right, you have a car," I snorted, remembering how he once drove me to school in a Porsche.

"You want a ride?"

"N-no." Why did I stutter?

He shrugged. "Maybe some other time. Tell me, why have you been walking around with a cactus in your hands?"

We made it to the bus stop. There were usually other students waiting, but today there was no one.

"It's for you," I said, staring at the road and avoiding his dangerous gaze. "I found it beside a trash can. Trash made me think of you, so here," I said, handing it to him. He took it with an unreadable expression. "I trust you to take good care of it. I named it Prick."

I cleared my voice. "Water him every week and put him near a window so that the sun can reach it."

"You bought it for me?"

I twitched. "No, I said I found it beside a-"

"The price tag is still on," he said, turning the pot around and showing me the white sticker. I tried to snatch the plant back, but he retreated with a wide grin.

"You really bought it for me," he teased. The smile on his face was going to be the death of me.

"So what if I did?" I snapped. "Your house is so empty, it's depressing. I bought you a plant to add some life to it, and it's also a thank you gift for everything you've done for me."

My bus arrived right on time. The doors opened, and I was about to get on, but Ivan caught my wrist.

"Thank you," he said, making my heart leap.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't buy it because I care about you or anything." Way to sound convincing.

"Are you going to Jason's party? He invited the whole class."

"I don't know."

"I'll be there." His velvet voice sent a million butterflies fluttering inside my chest.

"Then I'm definitely not going," I snorted.

"I'll see you tonight then?" It didn't sound like a question, but more like a confirmation.

"Don't count on it."

I climbed onto the bus and sat down, pressing my hands against my fiery face while trying to erase Ivan's smile that enthralled me. I swear, that boy was going to be the death of me.

Trevor, Scott, Charlie, and I went to Jason's party. Scott went to pick up Charlie in his car while Trevor and I walked to a store to buy beer with his fake ID. We could have picked Charlie up and bought drinks altogether, but something was telling me that Trevor and Scott wanted to go to the party separately. They still weren't talking to each other.

"Trevor!" Jason exclaimed when we arrived at his door. "How are you?"

Trevor put on a wide smile that revealed his straight, pearly white teeth.

"I'm doing great!" I could tell that Trevor was lying. Jason turned towards me and his eyes squinted.

"Is it me or did Scott get shorter?"

"No, this is Desmond," Trevor laughed, giving me a gentle push forward. Jason's eyes went as wide as golf balls.

"Desmond? Desmond Marshmellow? Desmond, as in the one who sits beside the Class Prince?"

I tried to count how many times he said my name.

"That's the one." Trevor smiled.

"Wow, it's so nice to meet you," Jason said shaking my hand so hard I said, shaking my hand so hard I thought my shoulder was going to pop. "Tell me, how did you do it?"

I stared at him as if he was speaking to me in a foreign language.

"Do what?" I asked blankly.

"How did you sit beside the Class Prince?" he asked eagerly.

I narrowed my eyes, wondering if this was a trick question.

"I pulled out a chair and sat down," I replied slowly.

Jason laughed, tilting his head back and shaking his head as if I had told him the world's funniest joke.

"I like you," he said, wiggling his finger at me. I snuck a glance at Trevor who mouthed, 'just go with it.'

Trevor introduced me to some of his friends before suddenly disappearing amongst the crowd. I had found a group of likeable people to hang out with. A couple of rounds of beer-pong later, I got a cup of water. I found Trevor in the living room, flirting with a girl. He pressed his hand against the wall, leaning forward to whisper something into the girl's ear. She giggled and batted her lashes, looking at Trevor as if she was completely love-struck. I shook my head with a sigh before heading to the kitchen to find my water. I raised my brows when I found Scott sitting on the kitchen floor with an empty bottle of vodka in his hand. His head bobbed, and I knew he was drunk.

"Hey, Scott," I said, sitting beside him. "How are you?"

"I think I'm drunk."

I laughed. "Yeah, buddy, I can see that."

"But you know what? Drinking this stuff hurts wayyy less," he giggled. His eyes were dilated, and I frowned.

"Okay, maybe we should slow down on the alcohol," I murmured, taking the bottle and putting it beside me. Scott tried to reach for it but was too drunk to lift a finger, so he rested his head on my shoulder instead.

"Trevor and I got into a fight," he mumbled.

"Yeah, he told me."

"He snuck out of the hospital just to see me," he giggled, shaking his head.

"He'd do anything for you," I murmured.

"I'm so stupid," he blurted, hitting his head. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"Hey, don't do that," I said, catching his fists.

"Why do people have feelings?"

My lashes fluttered at the question.

"Why do we feel? All we do is get hurt. We hurt because we feel. Why do we do that to ourselves?" He slurred his words, trying his best to keep his head up.

"Because life is a bitch." It was hard to tell if Scott was laughing or crying.

"I'll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell."

I shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think that's a good idea, Scott. You're drunk, you'll regret it."

"I'll regret it more if I don't," he hiccupped.

"Scott-"

"Please, Desmond. If I don't tell anyone, I think I'm going to die."

I pursed my lips, hesitant at first, but lent him my ear. Scott pressed his hand against my shoulder and leaned closer towards me.

"I'm in love with my best friend," he whispered. My eyes widened, and he pulled away, letting out a long sigh of relief.

"You won't tell him, right?" he asked, staring at nothing. It hurt me to see him like this.

"I won't tell him," I whispered.

He smiled sadly. "Good, me neither."

Charlie came into the kitchen and looked surprised when he saw us on the floor. "Are you guys okay?"

"Scott had a bit too much to drink, I think we should take him home."

"Xandy has a car, and he has drunk nothing, I'll go find him."

Before I could stop him, he scurried away and came back with the giant.

who narrowed his eyes at me.

"It's good to see you too," I grumbled. "Will you help me get Scott on his feet?"

He looked annoyed by my presence, but he crouched down and put Scott's arm around his shoulder, helping him onto his feet.

"Is it okay if I leave him in your hands?" I asked, turning only towards Charlie. Ivan was probably expecting me to be at the party, and I didn't want to ditch him like the last time. Charlie smiled, giving me a thumbs up.

"You can count on us!"

I shifted my gaze towards Xander. "Make sure Scott does nothing stupid, okay? You better take him straight home."

Xander ignored me and helped Scott walk out of the kitchen.

"Don't worry, I'll text you when he gets home," Charlie reassured me, before scurrying after them. I walked down the hall and found Jason talking with some friends.

"Hey, Jason, do you know where Trevor is?" I asked. It was best if he knew that Scott had gone home so he wouldn't worry.

"I think he went upstairs with a girl."

I stiffened. "Okay, thanks."

I walked up the flight of stairs and wandered down the empty halls, trying to find Trevor. I heard voices coming from a room and slowly walked towards it. A smile grew on my face when I saw Ivan, but I froze at the door when I saw that he wasn't alone. A beautiful girl stood in front of him. She had flowing blond hair and flawless pale skin that contrasted with her ruby lips. Her elegant dress had fallen to her ankles, and she stood in front of Ivan wearing nothing but her lacy underwear and bra. I felt my heart sink into the pit of my stomach.

Chapter 28: Everything

Ivan turned towards me, eyes widening as they met mine.

"Desmond?" he asked, brows slowly drawing together.

My heart twinged when he said my name. The girl gasped when she saw me, quickly pulling up her shimmering gold dress to cover her body. And then it hit me like a train. It felt like a slap to the face, a kick in the shin, a punch in the gut all at once. Anger? Sadness? Disappointment? I didn't know which it was. All I knew was that it hurt. It hurt like a bitch.

Fury? Anger? Sadness? Disappointment? Betrayal? I couldn't figure out which it was as my fists clenched tightly.

"Des-"

But before Ivan could even say my name, I turned around and stormed away. Each step felt as heavy as the feeling that weighed inside my heart, as if my muscles were giving in to gravity that was pulling me down.

Why did I feel so mad and betrayed? Why did seeing him with another girl hurt me so much? It wasn't like we were together, it wasn't like we were dating, so why did my heart feel like had just been shattered into pieces? Just because he gave me some of his attention? Just because he acted like he cared about me? Just because of a measly little kiss? All of that must have meant nothing to him, I was the fool for actually believing that he liked me.

"Desmond, wait!" I heard him call. He ran towards me and grabbed my arm.

"Let go of me," I snarled, pulling away with so much force that I staggered a few steps. There was a long pause.

"I think you're misunderstanding something."

"No, I think you're misunderstanding something," I hissed coldly. "You don't just go around playing with other people's feelings like that. You don't cuddle with them in bed, call and say that you miss them, tell them that you want to hear their voice and then ask them to kiss them! You don't just mess around with their feelings like that when you're just going to go sleep around with another girl!"

His brows drew together as I shouted angrily at him, but I couldn't hold back my anger. Yeah, I was sad, I was disappointed, furious, but most of all, I was hurt.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a girlfriend? If I knew, I wouldn't have... I wouldn't have..."

I bit my lower lip, stopping myself before the following two words could slip.

"You wouldn't have what?" he dared me to finish my sentence. "You wouldn't have what, Desmond?"

I refused to answer.

"Let go," I seethed.

"I didn't touch her," he said. I rolled my eyes.

"Right," I snorted. "Look, forget it. I'm leaving."

"Des," he sighed in frustration. "I was never messing with you. Everything I said and did was genuine. I hugged you because I like you, I called you because

I felt like I'd lose my mind if I didn't."

My heart fluttered at his husky voice, but I refused to give in.

"Desmond, I didn't touch her," he said. "She wanted to sleep with me and took her clothes off even though I refused. I was about to leave, but then you saw us."

"Liar," I spat coldly. But he looked at me with such genuine eyes that it was hard to believe that what he was saying wasn't true.

"Why would I touch her when the only person I want to touch is you?" he argued in a low, husky voice as he looked me in the eyes. I could feel the heat growing in my cheeks.

"I don't know, maybe you're just a horny," I mumbled hoarsely.

"Des," he sighed in frustration, saying my nickname in the voice that had my heart melt within seconds. "I was never messing with you. Everything I did and said was genuine, I would have never done them if I didn't like you."

My brows slowly furrowed.

"Did... Did you just say that you liked me?"

"Yes, I did. And I know you like me too."

"Wow, let's not get too cocky here."

"Then why are you so upset that I was with another girl?" he asked. I opened my mouth to say something but paused. I searched my brain to give

a reasonable answer, but I had nothing. I clicked my tongue, quickly shifting my eyes to the side.

I opened my mouth to say something but didn't have a good reason to defend my cause.

"Well, it's not like I don't dislike you or anything," I grumbled. Ivan took a step closer, taking my face into his hands.

"You're really cute when you get mad," he said with a small smile. His palms felt cool against my burning cheeks. "I want to kiss you."

"You make me want to jump off a cliff."

"Is that your way of saying that you like me back?"

I shrugged.

"Take it as you will."

Ivan had one of the most beautiful smiles I've ever seen in my life. I never thought that I would find another guy attractive, let alone, beautiful.

"I've never met someone as sassy as you. You're different," he chuckled, resting his forehead against mine. "Where do you get all that sass?"

"Get it? I was born with it," I said, cheekily. Ivan's smile widened before he lowered his head to kiss me again. He was more gentle this time, cupping one hand against my cheek before slipping his tongue into my mouth. I felt my body tingle in excitement, our kiss deepening by the second.

"You're different."

His words echoed inside my mind, making my heart flutter and my stomach twist in nervous knots. I thought that transferring to my brother's old high school would make my life worse, that I'd have to continue acting in a rebellious way to prove that I wasn't anything like Arthur; and that I didn't want to be.

But I've made new friends who liked me for who I was. I was different because I was myself, and that made me feel like I could be on top of the world.

"You've never done it with a boy?" he asked, pressing his waist against mine.

The feeling released butterflies inside my stomach.

"I'm not gay," I blurted out of reflex. He rolled his eyes, kissing my forehead.

"Of course you aren't."

The irony in his voice made it painful for me to hear. I was never good with words, Arthur was the one who won awards for eloquence competitions, I was too busy fighting with Rick and his gang. But I didn't want Ivan to get the wrong idea. I couldn't tell him that I liked him back, I'd cringe too hard at such cheesy words, but at the same time, I wanted to tell him that he was different too.

"You can be an exception," I almost whispered.

"I'll teach you," he suddenly said.

"Teach me what?"

Ivan hooked a finger over my belt and gave it a gentle tug.

"Everything."

I gulped.

"E...Everything?"

He smiled that beautiful smile that melted my heart. "Everything."

Chapter 29: The Prick and His Prince

I opened my eyes to find myself in Ivan's bed. I blinked a few times and pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Ouch," I hissed. Well, I wasn't dreaming. Memories from last night flashed through my mind, and I felt my face turn ghostly pale. I needed to get out of here. I sat up, but the door opened, and Ivan walked, wearing nothing but his pajama pants. A sweet aroma filled the room. He must have taken a shower.

""Morning," he greeted me casually, pulling a shirt over his head.

My brain stuttered; my limbs too mortified to move.

"You could have changed in the bathroom," I snapped.

"I could do a lot of things," he said with an impish grin. My cheeks flushed red. He approached the bed.

"Don't you dare come near me!"

He stared at me and sighed.

"You're being ridiculous," he said, ignoring my threat and snatching the pillow out of my hands. He lied down and tucked it under his head, scrolling through his phone like everything was oh, so normal.

"You were so much cuter last night."

"Exactly! Last night and not today, so everything that happened yesterday is in the past, so let's forget that it happened," I blurted. He looked up from his screen with a dark glare, but then his lips curved into a playful grin.

"Which part do you want me to forget? The part where you almost cried because you were jealous that I was with a girl or the part where we kissed?" he asked.

I flushed red and quickly pounced on top of him, straddling my legs around his waist and putting my hands over his mouth so that he would stop laughing.

He licked the palm of my hand and I jerked away with a scowl.

"That's disgusting!" I snapped and he rolled his eyes.

"We've done worse," he said. He then wrapped his arms around me and pulled me towards his face, giving me a quick peck on the lips before

looking at me with the sweetest smile. "Goodmorning, Des."

My name never sounded so beautiful to me before and I felt myself go weak for him once again. But I quickly gathered my strength to resist, pulling away from his grasp and moving towards the other side of the bed, grabbing the pillow and holding onto it just in case.

"Stop that," I snapped.

"Stop what?"

"Stop that twinkly look in your eyes!" I hissed. "Don't padazzle those sparkly balls of viciousness at me like that!"

"Something's telling me that you're not much of a morning person," he chuckled, turning back towards his phone. I sat there and frowned, wanting him to pay attention to me and not his phone. I turned to the side and my eyes widened.

"Prick!" I gasped as I saw the cactus I bought him sitting on his desk, right below the window.

"Hm? Oh yeah, you told me to put it where the sun could reach it, so I placed it on my desk," he said, finally looking up from his phone. "It kind of reminds me of you."

I furrowed my brows. "What do you mean?"

"It looks all tough and strong because it's prickly and has a lot of spines and needs little to survive, but really, it's just a cute little plant that needs lots of love and attention."

He looked at me and smiled, reaching towards me and lacing his warm fingers around mine, making my face blush pink. It was too early in the morning for my heart to be beating this quickly, too early.

"What kind of comparison is that," I snorted coldly.

"See? Prickly."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help but smile, and we both laughed. I didn't know why, but being around Ivan made me feel happy. It was a warm feeling, the one that you got when the sun shines over your skin, soft and diffuse.

"But I guess that's what I like about you," he murmured, brushing a thumb over the top of my hand.

"Because I'm different?"

I couldn't help but smile.

"So different," he chuckled. "There can only be one prickly Desmond in this world, tough-skinned, yet kind-hearted, with a little bit too much sass

and cheeks that blush like a bush of roses."

I rolled my eyes, pretending to dislike what he said. But I wondered deep down if he'd look at me the same if he ever met Arthur one day; if he'd be padazzled by Arthur's brilliance like everyone else.

Maybe it was wrong of me to say this, but deep down, I hoped that they'd never meet. Arthur always had everything, and I never minded, but Ivan... I wanted to keep Ivan to myself.

"You're different too," I murmured. "Everyone thinks you're perfect, which maybe you are, but you can also be a stubborn jerk when you don't get what you want. You're sneaky and manipulative too."

"You flatter me."

I let out a sheepish chuckle. "Too honest?"

He shrugged. "I think I can handle it. I mean, the first time we spoke, you called me a twat faced bimbo."

"That was unintentional," I murmured. "And I apologized for that."

"You said, I quote, 'I'm bad at apologies, so unfuck you or whatever,' he snorted. I shifted my gaze to the side.

"Hush boy, I'm a tough cookie."

Which for some reason, made him laugh.

Ivan and I were different, but we also shared a few similarities. Despite having friends, I couldn't help but feel like we were lonely in our own ways.

I wanted to ask him about his past, about his childhood, about the man who took care of him, if he missed him or if he even still talked to him. But those were touchy subjects that he'd undoubtedly avoid. I could understand why. But maybe one day, he'd open up to me and reveal all his secrets and unravel his world to me.

I was probably one of the "most impatient people in the universe", as my mom would say. But for some reason, I felt like for Ivan, I could wait an eternity.

Ivan looked at me and leaned forward to kiss me. Instinctively, I backed away, but a jolt of pain jolted up my waist and before I could catch myself, I tumbled off the bed like a tumbleweed. That was the third time it's happened, I was getting the feeling that his bed had a grudge against me.

"Why does my butt hurt?" I asked.

"You don't remember?"

My heart dropped.

"Remember what?" I asked weakly. I couldn't remember anything that happened after we kissed.

"What did we do?" I asked in horror.

"Nothing, unfortunately."

"Then why do my hips hurt?"

"After we kissed, you got embarrassed and tried to drink your feelings away."

I blinked blankly. That would explain the terrible headache.

"You passed out on the couch. I tried looking for your friends, but Charlie and Scott were nowhere in sight and Trevor was too drunk to take you home."

"Is Trevor okay?" I frowned.

"He's fine, I asked Jason to take care of him. As for you, I had to carry you on my back to bring you to my place. You wouldn't stop squirming, and then you tried to strangle me, screaming, 'Let me go, you hoe.'"

"Oh," I chuckled sheepishly. That sounded like something I would say.

"Then you ordered me to drop you."

"What did you do?"

"I dropped you."

My jaw dropped open, but he shrugged without a trace of remorse. "I was tired, and you weren't helping my mood, so I released you, and you fell on the ground. That's why your ass hurts," he said matter-of-factly.

"I can't believe you dropped me."

Ivan pulled me onto his bed, hugging me against his chest and resting his chin on my head.

"I carried you home when you were drunk, cleaned your puke, put you in clean clothes, and tucked you in bed too."

Did I cause that much trouble last night? I raised my gaze and met his, reaching out and gently patting his soft hair.

"Good job."

He blinked in surprise and suddenly looked away. Was he blushing? Before I could get a better look at his face, he got up and headed for the door.

"I'm going to make breakfast. Do you want anything to eat?"

"Can you make me pancakes?" I asked, wrapping myself in the warm blankets that smelled like Ivan. If Heaven existed, this would probably be it.

"Only if you give me a kiss," he grinned. I threw a pillow at him, and he swiftly ducked, laughing.

"Pancakes it is."

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Chapter 30: An Iconic Duo

Ever since that day, Ivan and I became closer than ever. We'd study together, eat together, sleep together, and when I didn't stay over at his place, we'd text until three in the morning. I always fell asleep before he did. Our first semester exams ended, and our teacher organized a school field trip to the mountains to celebrate. I climbed onto the bus, scanning the seats to find Ivan. I frowned when I saw that someone was already sitting beside him. Bitch-face Xander. He caught me glaring and smirked. I ignored him and sat beside Charlie, who had an armful of snacks.

"Hiya, Desy," he greeted cheerfully. "Why the long face?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Is it because Xandy is sitting beside your boyfriend?"

"I-Ivan's not my boyfriend!" I blurted.

"Well, have you two kissed?"

"What?"

"You know, did your lips touch and-"

"I-I know what a kiss is!" I blurted. I squeezed my hands together. "Maybe we have."

"And do you guys hug and cuddle?"

I averted my gaze. "Um..."

"Have you two had sex yet?"

I flushed red. "Charlie!"

"What?" he asked innocently, dangling his legs that were too short to touch the ground. He gave me a wide, toothy smile that stressed his dimples. "If you ever need some advice on sex positions-"

"Thank you, Charlie, but I think we're good," I said, cutting him off. He pouted in disappointment. "I promise if I ever need advice on, you know, you'll be the first person I ask."

Charlie's face brightened.

"Okay!" he beamed.

Trevor and Scott climbed onto the bus but sat in separate seats.

"They still aren't talking to each other?" I frowned. "It's already been three weeks."

"They look miserable," Charlie murmured. We watched Trevor stuck in his earphone and pull his hoodie over his head so that no one would bother him. We shifted our gaze towards Scott, who was staring out the window staring into the void with unfocused eyes.

"We should do something," I said.

"We could use duct tape and handcuffs."

"Charlie, we're trying to get them to restore their friendship, not get away with murder. I think I might have an idea. One that won't get us in prison."

"Okay, I'm all ears," Charlie beamed, linking his arm around mine and resting his head on my shoulder. My brows furrowed, getting a strange feeling that someone was watching us. I looked up and saw Xander throwing daggers at me with his eyes. I shuddered.

Yeesh, if eyes could kill.

We made it to our destination, and once everyone finished taking turns using the public washroom, we hiked up the mountain.

"I can't take another step," I groaned, dragging my feet forward.

"We've only walked for ten minutes," Scott said.

"This is my life now. I have climbed up this mountain, and now I shall die upon it."

"Desmond..."

"God, is that you?" I croaked, squinting my eyes at the bright blue sky. My friends laughed, pushing me forward and encouraging me to keep going. There was already a group of elderly who sat on benches, fanning themselves with large round fans while admiring the trees as if they've never seen a plant before.

"Do you think we'll grow old like them one day?" Trevor asked, nudging me in the ribs.

"Of course we will, but instead of hiking up mountains, you and I will probably be at a retirement home, eating raisins and playing bingo."

Trevor laughed. "We would, wouldn't we?"

"You'd fall asleep before the first round even ends."

He rolled his eyes. "And you'd throw a tantrum and flip the board because Karen won the game."

We both looked at each other and laughed. I glanced at one of the old ladies.

"Is she breathing?" I asked worriedly.

Trevor followed my gaze.

"She's probably just asleep," he said. He narrowed his eyes, suddenly looking doubtful. "Yeah, she's probably just asleep."

"Everyone gather around! We're going to take a picture!" Miss. Apple chirped, holding a camera in her hands while instructing the boys to gather around her.

"Shorties in the front, giants at the back," ordered Mr. Harrison. Ah yes, always elegant with his words. Charlie, Trevor, Scott, and I joined the group. Trevor and Scott purposely avoided each other, but Charlie and I shared a look. Mr. Harrison bent his knees and looked into the camera.

"One, two, say Mr. Harrison is the best gym teacher in the whole wide world!"

Right before he snapped the picture, Charlie switched places with Scott and I pushed Trevor to my right, and we trapped them between us. Mr. Harrison took another picture.

"Oh, I covered the camera lens with my finger. I might have to take another one," Mr. Harrison grumbled. "Alright, one, two-"

"Say cheese," chirped Miss. Apple before Mr. Harrison could say something weird again.

Everyone forced out an awkward 'cheese' while Charlie the loudest, most cheerful 'cheese' that broke the monotonous harmony. Even the supposedly dead grandma laughed.

CLICK.

As soon as they took the picture, Trevor and Scott both escaped our grasps and went separate ways.

"Come on, let's go see the picture," I said to Charlie. "I think I might have blinked."

We huddled around the teacher to look at the photo. My eyes widened when I saw that Trevor had put his arm around Scott's shoulder. He had the brightest smile on his face. Scott had tilted his head towards Trevor, his cheeks blushing as he smiled shyly. They looked happy standing next to each other. Charlie and I exchanged a gaze, probably sharing the same thought.

"Hey, Desy." He giggled. "You blinked." Or maybe not.

After a long day of walking under the scorching sun, we set up our tents in a camping area. Night had fallen, and all our teachers had all gone to bed. Trevor and I were lying on the grass, gazing at the stars. We talked about nothing and everything. That's what I liked about Trevor. You always had something to talk about with him, the spectrum ranging from bowel problems to the very essence of life.

"Do you ever want to run away?" Trevor asked.

"Always."

"Me too," he murmured. "Why don't we?"

"Because we're scared."

"Right." Trevor reached out and pinched his fingers around the bright moon. "You know, Scott and I used to lie down on the roof of my house and gaze at the sky when we were kids."

"You guys don't do that anymore?"

He shook his head.

"Is it because you grew too old for that?"

"What? Oh no, it's because I fell off the roof and broke my arm, so our parents forbid us from going back up there."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Oh, Trevor."

"That's what my mom said," he chuckled. "Anyway, before that incident, Scott and I always went up there and talked about running away. We said that we'd pack our bags and go on crazy adventures to see the world. It didn't matter where or how, as long as we were together, we knew that we'd be okay."

I could hear the nostalgia in his voice.

"We told each other everything up there. Even though we've known each other since we were toddlers, there were always new thoughts, new ideas, and new things to tell each other. We spoke about our fears, our secrets, our futures, our dreams. It was such a special place," Trevor sighed. "Do you believe in soul mates? I do. I think Scott's my soul mate. Whenever I look at the stars, I feel grateful to the universe for intersecting our lives. Can you believe it? Out of the billions of lives out there, the universe chose him and me."

"Sounds like fate," I agreed.

"Gosh, what happened to us? Is this what growing up does? Everything was so much easier back then. All I had to do was call his name from across the street and he'd come running Now?

Now he won't even look at me.'

"You can't end your friendship with one argument," I frowned.

"I don't think I can forgive him," Trevor muttered bitterly.

"Weren't you the one who told me that love, whether it's with friends, family, or a lover, hurts like hell, but that you and Scott loved each other unconditionally despite your imperfections?"

Trevor's jaw tightened, and he ran a hand over his face, shaking his head.

"He doesn't love me.'

"What do you mean?"

"You know how I snuck out of the hospital to see him? When I went to his house, he looked me straight in the eyes and told me he'd never considered me as a friend. I don't think I can forgive him for that," he whispered. I wanted to slap my hands against his cheeks and scream the truth at him, to tell him he had misunderstood what Scott meant. But I couldn't. I couldn't because it wasn't my role to tell him.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled my phone out.

Charlie: Everything is ready! It's up to you now.

"Hey, Trev? I forgot something in my tent. Will you go with me to find it?" I asked.

"Yeah, of course."

We headed to my tent but heard voices from inside.

"Is that Charlie?" Trevor asked, trying to identify the voice. Now was my time to shine. I let out a loud gasp, pointing my finger at the rustling tent.

"Oh. My. Gosh! I think Charlie and Scott are fighting in there!" I shouted in a stiff voice. I cringed at how unnatural I sounded, but the show must go on! "Quick Trevor, help them!"

Trevor ran into the tent, but as soon as he stuck his head inside, I pressed the flat of my foot against his back and pushed him forward. He lost his balance and fell flat on his face. Charlie, who had Scott pinned against the sleeping bag, quickly scrambled onto his feet and almost tripped on his way out. I closed the mouth of the tent and locked the zippers. Charlie and I high-fived in victory.

"Hey, what's going on?!" Trevor demanded, trying to unzip the flap.

"Charlie and I are tired of seeing you two fight," I stated.

"Yeah!" Charlie exclaimed with determination.

"We're not letting you out until you finally talk things out."

"Yeah!" he shouted, pumping his fist in the air with great enthusiasm.

"You two are best friends, you can't let an argument you're your entire friendship."

"Yeah!" Charlie said in a war-cry. I snapped my head towards him.

"Charlie," I hissed. "Don't just say 'yeah.'"

"Yeah! Oh, uh, I mean, yes!"

I tilted my head back and held back a groan.

"What's wrong, Desy?" Charlie asked quizzically. "Is it me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, you're doing great, sweetie."

"Guys," Scott groaned, glaring at us through the thin fabric of the tent.

"This isn't funny. Let us out."

"Not until you two make up. You can either talk things out or spend the night in awkward silence. It's your choice."

Charlie and I headed back to the campfire, ignoring their desperate pleas and shouts.

Chapter 31: Girly-Wirly Push-Ups

I woke up to the sound of our tent unzipping, opening my droopy eyes that widened as I saw our gym teacher, Mr. Harrison, step in with a megaphone in front of his lips.

"RISE AND SHINE BOYS!" he hollered, Charlie and I jolting up and hitting our heads during the process. We moaned in pain. "DUMB AND DUMBER! GET YOUR SORRY BUTTS OUTSIDE!"

He then marched away, barking at our neighbors.

"It's too early for this," I moaned, slumping onto my back.

"Desy," whined Charlie, rubbing his sore head against my waist.

We eventually found the strength to crawl out of our tents. It had rained heavily last night, so the ground was still damp. Mud sloshed under our shoes as we joined the other unhappy boys who stood in front of Mr. Harrison while trying not to doze off. The school pamphlet never said our field trip would also be a military bootcamp. Our gym teacher divided us into three groups. Group one had to run laps around the hill, group two did jumping jacks, and group three - my unfortunate group - was ordered to do push-ups on the muddy ground.

Trevor and Scott were in group one, and it relieved me when I saw them push each other and laugh. Trevor shoved Scott, who almost tripped, so Scott hooked his foot around Trevor's ankle. He fell flat on his face. He quickly got up and tackled Scott to the ground, and they wrestled in the mud while giggling themselves silly. It made me happy seeing them back to normal. They must have made up after Charlie and I locked them inside their tent. My eyes wandered and saw Ivan sitting on a bench table, calmly sipping a warm drink from his mug. His gaze met mine, and he gave me a friendly wave.

How was he not doing anything?! Why wasn't Mr. Harrison yelling at him?! And why in the world was he looking at me like that?!

"ARE YOU GETTING DISTRACTED RIGHT NOW, MELLOW?!"
Hollered Mr. Harrison.

"No, teacher-"

"THAT'S SIR TO YOU, YOUNG MAN!"

"Sir, yes, sir?" I said, so confused.

"TAKE OFF YOUR SHIRT AND GIVE ME ANOTHER 30! NOW!"

"30?!"

"I want another 40!"

"But you just said 30!" I argued. He bent down, raising his megaphone to my face.

"MOVE YOUR BOO-TAY AND GIVE ME FOR-TAY."

Mr. Harrison moved on to his next victim: Charlie.

"CHARLIE! WHAT ARE THOSE GIRL WIRLY PUSH UPS?!"

"I don't know, sir!" Winced Charlie, his face bright red as he tried his best to push himself up.

"EVEN MY 6 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER CAN DO MORE THAN YOU!"

"That's very impressive of her, sir!" Squeaked Charlie.

"EVEN MY GRANDMOTHER CAN DO MORE THAN YOU!"

"I aspire to be like her one day, sir!"

"YOU ASPIRE TO BE MY MOTHER?!" yelled our gym teacher.

"N-N-NO SIR!" cried Charlie.

"ARE YOU SAYING YOU DON'T WANT TO BE MY MOTHER?!" yelled Mr. Harrison.

"NO, SIR, I'D BE HONORED TO BE YOUR MOM!"

I felt bad for Charlie, but I was also having a hard time trying not to laugh.

Mr. Harrison paused with a scowl, finally lowering his voice. "Now that's just weird Charlie," he mumbled. "JUST GIVE ME ANOTHER TEN!"

"YES, SIR!"

The teacher wouldn't leave Charlie alone, but Xander suddenly came up to him.

"Sir, Simon slipped on the mud and may have twisted his leg."

Mr. Harrison threw his hands in the air in despair.

"This generation of pussies! Alright, keep an eye on these ladies while I go save the damsel in distress."

"Yes, sir," he grunted with a nod.

"Good boy," he grunted, clapping him on the shoulder before storming away. "ALRIGHT, WHERE IS SHE?"

Once he was gone, Xander looked towards Charlie.

"Charlie," he said. "Go grab me some water."

"But Mr. Harrison told me to-"

"Just go while he's not here," pressed Xander.

"What if he gets mad?"

"I'll take care of it," Xander pressed gently, wiping away the smear of mud on Charlie's cheek. Charlie gave him a grateful salute before scurrying away.

"Hey, that was kind of nice of you," I said. Xander lowered his gaze at me, his eyes hardening.

"What did you say, Dexter?"

I twitched. "Forget it."

He was about to leave, but I scrambled onto my feet.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" Before he could decline, I asked anyway. "You never told me why you hate me so much. I don't mind, but I'm curious."

Xander looked like he was about to tell me, but changed his mind.

"Ask Ivan. He knows why."

"What do you know that I don't?" I demanded.

"I told you to ask him," he snapped.

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"Because it's not my role to do so."

My mouth snapped shut, remembering how I wanted to tell Trevor Scott's secret last night but didn't because it wasn't my part to play. My lips pressed together when I watched Xander walk away.

"Hey, bitch-face?" I called. He stopped in his steps. "You think if whatever made you hate me didn't happen, we'd be friends?"

Xander glanced over his shoulder. "Fuck, no."

He jogged to join the others, and I smiled.

The intense workout was over, and everyone collapsed onto the soil, exhausted. We were covered in mud from head to toe and looked like we had spent the entire morning in a pig's sty. A gentle shower poured on top of us, but the tiny raindrops quickly became round and heavy. I dragged myself onto my feet and headed for shelter. But someone grabbed me by the wrist, pulling me behind a tree.

"What-"

Ivan pressed his lips against mine. He ran his fingers through my hair, pushing back the strands that became one with my forehead. The tree leaves weren't enough to protect us from the rain, but the burning touch of his consumed me. I felt his warm lips smile against mine, and I sank into his arms, tasting him, feeling him, melting into him. His tongue teased mine and searched deeper into my mouth. Our lips locked and our bodies intertwined, the rainy world becoming nothing more than a blur. I pulled away for breath, staring into his dashing grey eyes, a prettier version of the sky above us. His wet, dark hair almost looked black, and they stuck to his smooth skin.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, glaring at Ivan. He took a step towards me, wrapping his arms around my waist as he pulled me in.

"I missed you," he murmured softly, making my face turn bright red. He leaned over for a kiss but I quickly pulled away from his grasp, putting my hands over my lips.

"Ivan, you have to stop doing that!" I hissed.

"Stop doing what?"

"You... You always do what you want, whenever you want. You can't just grab me out of the blue and kiss me," I snapped.

"Well, I can't do it if you pull away," he implied. I rolled my eyes, arms crossed over my chest.

"You know what I mean," I growled. "Look, if you want things to work out between us, you need to think about my feelings too."

Ivan smiled.

"What are you smiling for?" I snapped in annoyance.

"You said 'us,'" he mused. "It was cute."

"Ivan," I groaned and he chuckled in that husky voice of his.

"Alright, alright, you want me to be less dominant, is that it?" He said, lacing his fingers gently around mine as he pushed me against the wall. But his actions were completely contradicting his words. "You want me to be more considerate of your feelings, is that it, princess?"

"I'm not a princess," I snapped.

You said us, he mused. It was cute.

"Ivan," I groaned and he chuckled in that husky voice of his.

"Alright, alright, you want me to be less dominant, is that it?" He said, lacing his fingers gently around mine as he pushed me against the wall. But

his actions were completely contradicting his words. "You want me to be more considerate of your feelings, is that it, princess?"

"I'm not a princess," I snapped.

"But what's a class prince without a princess?"

"A single prince," I retorted.

He rolled his eyes, "Very funny, Des," he murmured, his lips parting and leaning towards mine. But he suddenly stopped as if he just remembered my words. His eyes flickered towards mine. "Can I kiss you?"

I looked at him and sighed. "Fi-"

He pressed his lips against mine, and the rest was history.

Chapter 32: My Life So Far

It was our last night in the mountains. We camped in a public camping ground with another high school. There were also a couple of college students who came here on a hike. My friends and I sat around the campfire, roasting marshmallows while telling each other spooky stories. We had to stop because Trevor got too scared. I was sitting at the campfire, roasting marshmallows with my friends while thinking about Ivan and our make-out session in the shower stalls.

"Desmond! Your marshmallow is on fire!" screamed Charlie, quickly pulling it away from the fire and blowing like his life depended on it.

"Sweet, burnt marshmallow!" grinned Trevor, eating it in one bite. "Ah, ah, ish haat!"

"Trevor, spit that out! It's completely burnt!" Snapped Scott, grabbing his jaw and opening his mouth.

"Nuh! Pweshush marsh ma hoe musht naht be wai-shted! (precious marshmallow must not be waisted)" argued Trevor.

Scott was trying to take out the burnt marshmallow that Trevor was now choking on.

I sometimes wonder how we became friends.

"Guys! I just remembered!" gasped Charlie, quickly scurrying off towards our tent. He came back with the most random thing.

A ukelele.

I raised a curious brow as I heard Trevor mumble an "Oh boy," under his breath.

Charlie proudly sat back down as he positioned the instrument against his chest, clearing his voice. "I'm going to play a song for you right now."

He smiled. "It's called My life so far."

"Wait, Charlie-"

But before Trevor could finish, Charlie took in a deep breath and played a cord.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH," he screamed, making me jump and fall off my chair. I quickly picked myself up, putting my hand over his mouth to

stop him.

He furrowed his brows and blinked at me in confusion.

"I think we should wait for tomorrow, uh, you might wake up the teachers," I quickly said.

"Or never," smirked Trevor, followed by a loud "ow!" as Scott smacked his arm.

"How about I play something?" Scott suggested. Charlie and I turned towards him in surprise.

"You know how to play the ukulele?" Charlie asked.

"I play the guitar, so playing the ukulele is easy." Scott smiled shyly.

"Scott and I used to be in a band." Trevor grinned. "I was the lead singer."

"Which is why we disbanded," Scott coughed, which made Trevor gasp. Charlie handed him the ukulele, and Scott placed it against his chest. He strummed his fingers against the cords and began playing. My eyes widened, struck by Scott's beautiful singing voice. The song he sang was about heartbreak, and I couldn't help but glance towards Trevor. I think we all knew, but we quietly sat around the campfire, listening to the song lost in our thoughts. When it ended, the three of us stood up and clapped. Scott blushed, handing Charlie the instrument back.

Trevor frowned, his eyes completely focused on Scott. Charlie and I still didn't know what had happened in the tent the other day, but something told me that they had decided to stay friends. Or at least, one of them did. Trevor opened his mouth to say something, but someone approached our campfire.

"Excuse me?" said a girl, who was probably one of the university girls that camped right next to us.

She looked towards Scott with a small smile.

"Um, a friend of mine kind of wants to talk to you," she said. "She's too nervous to come here so we were wondering if you could go her. I know that she doesn't know you but she finds you really cute."

"Um..." Scott awkwardly scratched the nape of his neck and Charlie and I shared a look.

"He'd be more than happy to," beamed Charlie, pulling Scott up on his feet before he could answer.

"Uh, guys, I don't-"

"Have fun, Scott," I grinned, pushing him forward. Trevor frowned.

"But-"

I quickly shoved a handful of marshmallows into his mouth.

"Don't get lost on your way back!" I sang. Scott gave us a weird look and was hesitant at first, but he finally followed the girl.

"Guys, what if that girl is a psychopath trying to lure in her prey? Scott could be killed!" Hissed Trevor, spitting out the marshmallows, obviously upset about something.

"I highly doubt that buddy," I chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. "Come on man, Scott's scoring an older girl. An older girl!"

"But she could be dangerous! What if she pounces on Scott when he has his back turned and we never hear of him again?"

"Dude, you're overreacting," I snorted.

"But-"

"Trev, you're acting like a jealous boyfriend," I said jokingly. Trevor flinched and my laugh quickly faded.

"Whatever, I'm just saying," he grumbled hoarsely, poking at the fire with his twig. But before I could say anything, he quickly cut me off. "I think we need more wood," Trevor said, clearing his voice. He was changing the subject. "Rock, paper, scissors?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're so childish, how old-"

"Rock, paper, scissors!" he shouted, and the four of us quickly pulled out our hands. Trevor and Charlie played rock and I played scissors. A wide grin spread across Trevor's face and I rolled my eyes.

"Fine, I'll get the wood," I muttered. Trevor snickered and I pushed him off his mini camping chair that was too small for him anyway.

I went into the dark forest, using a flashlight as my only source of light. There was a small cabin with cut logs for campers to use. The only problem was that was far away from the camping site. I shuddered when I heard the bushes around me rustle. I flicked on the lights and entered the cabin, pulling out two logs from the pile. The isolated, dark cabin gave me the heebie-jeebies, and I was eager to join my friends again. I closed the door behind me but yelped when a dark figure approached me, dropping the logs onto the ground.

"Hi!"

A girl with long blond hair stood behind me, looking just as surprised as I was before giving me a small smile. I raised my lantern, narrowing my eyes to get a better look.

Wait, why does she look so familiar? I feel like I've seen her before. But where?

My eyes widened as I finally recognized her face. She was the girl who was standing half-naked in front of Ivan at Jason's party.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

She frowned, picking up my flashlight for me.

"My high school is on a field trip; we camp right next to yours. I saw you at the campfire and recognized you from the other night."

"What a small world," I chuckled stiffly. "I never got the chance to apologize that night."

"Don't worry, it's fine." She smiled, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "My name is Cessa."

She gave out her hand, and I quickly wiped my dirty hands on my pants before shaking it. "Desmond."

"I'm guessing that you know Ivan? He looked worried when he ran after you," she said in a sickly-sweet tone. My Desy senses were telling me that she was bad news.

"I used to live in the same neighborhood before he moved away. We don't talk like we used to, not after I confessed my feelings to him."

I felt an uneasy atmosphere around us and was even more eager to return to the campsite.

"It was nice meeting you," I said, crouching down to pick up my logs.

"Where are you going? Shouldn't you be happy that a pretty girl is talking to you?"

I raised my brows. "Bold of you to think you're pretty."

She tossed her gold locks over her shoulder, her blue eyes casting a haughty glare.

"You're gay," she stated. "You're not attracted to me because you're gay."

"No, sweetheart, I just know a bitch when I see one," I said.

"You like Ivan, don't you?" she sneered. "Just because he gives you a little of his attention doesn't mean you're special. He'll eventually get bored."

"The same way he got bored of you?" I snorted. "Look Cessa, you seem like a really nice girl, but what happens between him and I is none of your business."

I tried to walk past her, but she stepped in front of me.

"You know nothing about him! He doesn't love you, the person he loves left him three years ago! He's just using you to forget about his heartbreak. You're nothing but a temporary replacement! I won't let another mentally ill gay kid make him miserable. Why can't you leave him alone? Let him live a normal life. If you love him, then you'll let him be normal!"

"I have to go." I didn't bother picking up the second log and tried to leave, but she sunk her claws into my arm.

"I SAW HIM FIRST! HE'S MINE!" she screamed at me.

"Ouch, that hurts!"

I tried to pull away, but her nails sunk deeper into my skin as she held me back. So I finally yanked away with all my might, her nails scratching down my arm and slipping off my wrist. She lost her balance and staggered back, tripping over the wood she made me drop earlier and hitting her head hard against the tree behind us.

Chapter 33: Framed

Everything happened so quickly that my mind needed time to process everything. My eyes widened as I quickly bent down in front of her.

Cessa was on the ground, groaning in pain. Well, at least she wasn't dead.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked. She let out a small whimper, feeling the back of her head. Our eyes widened when we saw her fingers coated in red. Pain replaced her initial shock. Her lower lip quivered, and she burst into tears.

"Don't cry," I stammered. "It's not as bad as you think."

"There's blood EVERYWHERE!" she shrieked at me. Okay, so maybe it was as bad as she thought.

"Here, put this against your head, it'll help stop the bleeding," I said, taking off my jacket and handing it to her. "Take a deep breath and wait here. I'll go find a teacher."

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked. I furrowed my brows in confusion.

"I'm not touching you," I said, raising both hands to prove my innocence. "Look, we need to get you to the teachers. Can you stand up by yourself?"

"I said stop touching me!" she shrieked again. Before I could argue that my hands weren't anywhere near her, she started to cry for help. "Someone help me! This student is harassing me! Someone, anyone! Help me!"

Harassing you? Did you really hit your head that hard?

I pursed my lips. "Cessa, I'm not-"

"Hey, get off of her!" someone barked from behind. I felt a hand yank me backward, punching me straight across the face. I staggered sideways, the taste of blood soaking my tongue. I glared at the student who just hit me with clenched fists.

"What was that for?!" I demanded angrily.

"What kind of jerk are you, trying to take advantage of a girl!"

And that's when I realized that with Cessa's desperate cry for help, the situation did probably look pretty shady from afar. And it was too dark for them to really see what was happening which also contributed to the misunderstanding.

"I wasn't taking advantage of her. I was trying to help her!" I hissed, but the boy pushed me back and was about to throw another punch, but I refused to get hit twice. I ducked and slammed my knuckles against his jaw first. Two students sprinted towards us and tore us apart.

"What's going on?" Mr. Harrison shouted, storming towards us wearing a 'Best Daddy in the World' pajama T-shirt.

"This student was taking advantage of Cessa!" the boy who hit me said.

"I didn't take advantage of her. I was trying to help her!" I shouted angrily.

"I saw it happen with my own eyes!"

"You saw shit, ass-hat," I spat.

He tried to throw another punch, but the student behind him held him back.

"What is wrong with you boys? Stop fighting like dogs, I've had enough of this toxic masculinity," Mr. Harrison said, making my jaw drop. He was the one saying that?! He turned towards Cessa and made a face. He leaned towards me.

"Tell me that that's ketchup on her face," he whispered.

"No, not ketchup," I mumbled. He tried to mask his scowl with a friendly smile. The keyword was tried.

"Hey, sweetheart, are you alright?"

She shook her head, more tears streaming down her cheeks as she whimpered.

"Tell me what happened. Did any of these boys hurt you?" he cooed. I looked at her with pleading eyes, hoping that she'd tell them the truth, but my heart dropped when she raised an accusing finger at me.

"That boy tried to take advantage of me. He said he wanted to tell me something important. I believed him and followed him here, but then he started touching me inappropriately," she sobbed. "I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't leave me alone. When I tried running away, he started getting violent and pushed me against the tree. Look!"

She showed them the blood on her hand.

"That's a shameless lie!" I rasped.

"A-A-And he even started to take his clothes off," she whimpered. "When I tried to escape, he started to get violent and pushed me against the tree. I hit my head, look!"

She put her hand against the back of her head and showed them the fresh blood that stained her fingers before breaking down into more tears.

Mr. Harrison snapped his head towards me with a furious look in his eyes that made me glad that he was a teacher, or else he probably would have punched me unconscious by now.

"Sir, that's not what happened!" I almost shouted. "She's lying. I only took off my jacket so that-"

"I don't want to hear another word from you!" he barked, veins popping out of his forehead as he shook with anger. "IN MY OFFICE, NOW!"

This man really just said tent-office.

None of them gave me the chance to give my side of the story, and the two students dragged me like a prisoner. Mr. Harrison tried to comfort Cessa, who was still fake crying. While I was being pulled away, my eyes met hers. A sardonic grin slithered on her face before she continued with her glorious act. And that was how my first field trip at Ivory high ended.

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Chapter 34: A Friend

A teacher drove me back to the city to a local police station. A police officer escorted me to a cell room where I'd have to wait for my mom to pick me up. According to my teacher, who was on the phone with her a few minutes ago, she was already on her way. The police officer opened the metal doors, and my eyes widened when I saw a familiar face. Rick stared back in surprise.

"Wait, I'm sharing a cell with this guy?" I asked in disbelief. Why, oh why, did the world hate me so much?

"You want to be put with the thirty-five-year-old man who just got caught for first-degree murder?"

I gulped. "This will be perfect."

I voluntarily stepped into the cell and flinched when the metal door closed behind me. I pressed my face against the bars like in the movies.

"This is it for me," I murmured to myself. "This is where I die."

The prison cell was a hollow cube of concrete, one way in, no windows. There was a sad grey bed, a sad grey toilet, and a sad grey delinquent sitting on the floor studying me. Given enough time, a person could forget their own in this place. The isolation was total, and the stimulation was zero. I sat down on the bed across from Rick. His red Mohawk was lifeless and drooped over the center of his forehead. There were fresh cuts and bruises on his face.

"Got into another fight?" I guessed.

"Yup," he grumbled. "Did something stupid again?"

"Yup," I replied.

We looked at each other and shared the gaze of silent compassion.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Apparently, I sexually harassed a girl."

He whistled. "Tough luck."

"I didn't do it," I blurted hastily.

"Never said you did."

I studied his face, biting the inside of my cheek.

"You believe me, right?" Even I could hear my own desperation.

"You're stupid, not a predator."

"Gee, thanks," I laughed dryly, feeling secretly relieved.

"I always knew we'd end up behind bars, I just didn't think it'd be behind the same ones."

"And I always thought you'd be in here a couple years before me."

We looked at each other and laughed, but it didn't last very long and the dull silence consumed the grey cell once again. His shoulders were hunched, making him look smaller than he was, and there was a certain level of tiredness in his dark eyes. Rick looked old for his age, and I wondered what he'd been through to look the way he was now.

"What happened to you?" I asked. His eyes flickered towards me. "After they expelled you from Junjay High, what happened?"

"They sent me to another high school. Not some posh rich one like yours. My parents don't have that kind of connection." I caught the hint of disgust lingering in his voice. "I got into trouble again and thought to myself, what was the point? So, I dropped out."

"You dropped out?"

"Yup," he said, popping the 'P'.

He rolled one of the metal rings around his fingers and I noticed that his nails were painted black. Despite our mutual dislike, I've always admired him. Rick wasn't afraid to make a bold fashion statement or express himself in ways no one else dared to do. Colorful hair, painted nails, unique clothes, you name it.

"I'm surprised you're still in school," Rick said. "You used to hate it."

"Who enjoys waking up at seven in the morning to be stuck in a small room with other kids who don't know what the fuck they're doing there?" I laughed bitterly.

"But like the other kids, you're going to stay there even if you hate it."

I felt ashamed. "Yeah."

"For your parents or society?"

"Both. Do you think I'm a coward?"

"Nah, you're a lot of things, Desmond, but you're definitely not a coward," Rick chuckled. "You and the other kids? The ones who stay in school and listen? I admire you."

He licked his lips, staring at the floor. "That place made me feel worthless. I felt like a rat trapped in a cage, forced to do the same routine.

Sleep, eat, study. Sleep, study, study. Study, study, study. Over, and over again."

Rick shuddered.

"They crush us and mold us to be mediocre. You tell them you want to do art, and they laugh in your face and tell you to get a real job, do real shit." He shook his head, raising his gaze to meet mine. "Hell, I'm going to leave masterpieces that'll exist for an eternity while they make money that'll be someone else's the second they die."

When he spoke about school, Rick blended in with his background, looking like a dull, miserable prisoner, but everything about him changed when he mentioned art. Determination burned in his eyes, his sagged shoulders lifted, even his red hair seemed more vibrant.

"You should do it. Art, I mean, you should do it," I said. "You might as well die Rick the Artist than Rick the Delinquent."

His face washed blank with confusion, and then a small smile lifted on his lips.

"Rick the Artist," he echoed, fascinated by the title. "I like the sound of that."

Silence followed, but one that wasn't awkward or discomforting.

"Hey, Desmond?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry for beating you up in an alley."

"Shit happens." I shrugged. "Sorry for breaking your nose twice."

"Shit happens." He raised his shoulders. "You know why I liked you in high school? It was because we shared one similarity."

"Which was?"

"We break the rules to exist as individuals and not as people."

My eyes widened and let his words sink in. We heard footsteps echo down the hallway. I knew from the sound of intimidating heels that my mom was here. She appeared at the door with a police officer who opened the door for me. I pulled myself onto my feet and left, but not before glancing over my shoulder and looking at Rick one last time. I had the feeling that we wouldn't be seeing each other soon.

"Hey, Rick? You better mention my name when you get rich and famous," I said. He nodded with a smile.

"Take care of yourself, Desmond."

I left the cell, and my mom glanced at me. "Who was that?"

I shrugged, shoving my hands into my pockets.
"A friend."

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Chapter 35: The Truth

I spent the next few days going in and out of the police station. There were meetings, interrogations, police officers with breath that reeked of coffee, free donuts, and more meetings. I was sitting on a plastic chair while the adults were having a conversation in the conference room, but I wasn't allowed to take part despite the matter concerning me.

"Now, you listen here," I heard my mom shout from inside the room. "I know my son, and he is a good boy. He would never touch a girl without her consent, never!"

"Ma'am, please calm down."

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down, not when everyone is falsely accusing my son of a crime he didn't commit! That girl is a liar!"

"We found in his past school records that he was caught doing certain things with a girl in a classroom. His suspicious behavior is playing against his favor."

"Suspicious? He's a teenager, you worthless swine! Teenagers break rules all the time, it's in their nature. Oh, don't look at me as if you've never secretly done it with someone in a public location..."

My mom continued to shout at them while occasionally throwing insults. Well, my temper had to come from somewhere. I was glad that she was defending me. A few days ago when I had left the prison cell, I thought she would have scolded me like she usually would, but this time; she didn't jump to conclusions and asked for my version of what happened. Not only did she listen to me, but she also believed me.

Despite her support, I wasn't allowed to return to school until the case was cleared. My friends promised to take down notes for me and sent me our homework every night so I wouldn't be too far behind in class. As for Ivan, I haven't heard from him since the field trip. He didn't answer my texts or calls, and I couldn't help but worry. Did he believe in Cessa's version of the story? Did he get bored of me? I missed him. I wanted to see him. Where was he? My mom stormed out of the conference room, breaking me out of my thoughts.

She slammed the door so hard the walls shook.

"Come on, Desmond, we're going home." She was already halfway down the hall when she spoke, and I had to run to catch up to her.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The police, that's what."

The door behind us opened.

"Ma'am, you can't just walk out like that!" a police officer called after her.

"Watch me."

My mom had never been more of a badass. I smiled, following her out of the police station.

"What did the police officers say?"

"They said to get a lawyer but that the punishment will be lighter if you admit to your mistake," she said, rolling her eyes at the last word as we drove out of the parking lot.

My eyes fell to my lap. "Maybe I should just apologize to Cessa."

My mom slammed on the breaks so abruptly that I leaned forward in my seat, clutching my seatbelt. She snapped her head toward me.

"You will not apologize for a crime you did not make, do you understand me, young man?" she demanded, anger and sadness lingering in her eyes. "You're a good kid, Desmond, I know

I've never made you feel like you were, and I know the world has never made you feel like it, but you are. You're a wonderful boy, and I'm not going to let a messed-up justice system ruin your life."

My eyes widened, and I felt a lump in my throat. When push came to shove, my mom had always been there for me.

"Thanks, Mom," I murmured. She smiled and continued driving down the road. We arrived home. There was a black Porsche parked in front of the house. Leaning against it was Ivan. My face brightened, and I smiled for the first time in a while.

"I'll wait for you inside," my mom said. She waved at Ivan, who offered her a polite smile in return. I went up to him, unsure whether to hug or punch him. He smiled, but something felt off.

"Hey," he said, breaking the silence.

"Hey," I echoed, trying to ignore the strange atmosphere that hung over our shoulders. "Did you hear what happened?"

"I know you didn't do it."

The muscles in my jaw relaxed, and I felt relieved.

"I talked to Cessa. She said that she'll admit to her false accusations. They should clear your name by tonight."

My lashes fluttered in shock. "Really? What did you say to her?"

"We just spoke." His voice was icy cold and sliced like frostbite. His blue-grey eyes had returned, and every trace of warmth I had witnessed these past few weeks was gone. We were back to being strangers.

"What did you say to her?" I pressed. There was no way Cessa would drop the charges wanting nothing in return. "Look, I don't know what she asked you to do, but I don't need your help."

"You're in this mess because of me, of course I had to do something." His harsh voice made my stomach twist. "I think we should stop seeing each other."

Is this what Cessa wanted in exchange for my freedom?

"You can't be serious," I scoffed.

"I am."

"No, you're not!" I shouted in frustration. "You don't have to listen to her, I can find another way."

"It's not because Cessa."

"I missed you," I blurted, my voice raw with emotions. Ivan's jaw tightened, and he ran both hands through his hair.

"What do you want me to say?" He exhaled in frustration. I flinched, clenching my fists at my sides.

"I want you to be honest, you prick! I want you to tell me you were worried about me, that you missed me and that it killed you not to answer my calls or texts, that you spent hours thinking about me!" I shouted, pushing his chest, shoving him back, desperate to get any other reaction than the rigid expression plastered on his face. "Why can't you be honest with me?"

"Because you're going to hurt!" he shouted back. His voice faltered into a whisper. "And I don't want you to get hurt, Des. You were right about me, I'm an arrogant, manipulative, deceiving jerk. It's who I am."

"And despite it all, I still love you!"

Ivan's jaw ticked, and he took a step back, shaking his head.

"Don't," he choked.

"Don't what? Love you? It's already too late, dumbass!"

A few weeks ago, I could barely show him I cared. Now, I was screaming my feelings into his face loud enough for the entire world to hear. I didn't know which was more tragic.

"I have to go. Take care of yourself." He opened his car door, but I blocked his path.

"Don't say that."

"Why?"

"Because 'take care' is your cowardly way of saying goodbye! It's your way of saying it's over! Your way of leaving! If you're going to end things with me, then do it like you mean it!"

I unclenched my fists.

"I know it's difficult for you to trust and love. I know you've been hurt in the past, and that you're still hurting, but don't push me away and act like you don't care. I can wait. I'll wait however long you need me to. We'll figure it out together, step by step, you and me," I rasped. "Ask me to be yours, and I will. Don't leave me like this."

Ivan looked at me with pained eyes.

"Arthur," he murmured.

"What?"

"Your older brother was the one who took care of me when I was younger. He was the one in the photo you saw in my room. I knew who you were the second I saw you. Arthur had contacted me, saying that his little brother was transferring to Ivory High, and asked me to keep you out of trouble."

I felt like someone had punched me in the gut, and I couldn't breathe. My lips parted, but nothing came out. It was as if I was drowning underwater, everything slow and warbled.

"I was nothing but a replacement," I whispered weakly.

"No, Des-"

I slapped his hand away, retreating away from him.

"Everything you said and did was a lie. You saved me from Rick's gang because I was Arthur's little brother. You carried me home and took care of my injuries, tutored me, and pretended to love me, but none of that was for me, was it? You did it for Arthur."

"No, that's not true."

"Like hell it isn't! I was a replacement and you know it!" I said, the words hurting my throat. Everything began making sense. Xander didn't

hate me because I had done something wrong to him, he hated me because Arthur had hurt his best friend, and as a result, his hatred extended to me.

"Did you love Arthur?" My voice cracked, and I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Desmond..."

"Just answer the damn question!"

His lips formed a grim line, and after a dreadful pause of silence, he finally answered.

"I did."

It hurt so much that I couldn't help but laugh. I giggled so hard, my entire body shook and ached. How foolish was I to think for once in my life, someone would take an interest in me for who I was and not for Arthur? How stupid of me. I turned on my heel and walked away, but stopped in my steps and turned around, casting him a dark glare.

"You said that you knew me the second you saw me, but you were wrong," I said, speaking in a steady voice for the first time. His brows pulled together in confusion. "I'm not Arthur's little brother. I'm Desmond fucking Mellow, you ignorant piece of shit."

I walked away and didn't look back.

Chapter 36: The Five Stages of Grief

Denial

If someone had told me that love would hurt so much, I would have never gotten involved with the boy with mahogany curls and a crooked smile, the one with a dangerous aura and cold eyes. Love was like a constant war with yourself. Passion and desire overpowered rationality, and every choice and thought you made contradicted logic. You tell yourself, if life was going to be sad, we might as well be sad while in love; and so we tossed aside our armor and gave the other a loaded gun pointed at our heart, trusting them not to pull the trigger. I refused to believe that I was one of these people; that I had been foolish enough to let myself be weak and vulnerable. Maybe this was all just a bad dream. Maybe everything was just my imagination. I tried to convince myself that none of it was true, that tomorrow I would wake up and everything would be okay.

It didn't happen. It didn't happen. It didn't happen...

Anger

I eventually had to acknowledge that it happened. Cessa came clean to the police, and the charges were dropped. We met at the police station, and she apologized. I was mad at her, but not for what she thought. She asked for my forgiveness. I couldn't give that to her. My bitterness then expanded to Arthur. If he hadn't existed, then maybe things would be different. If we hadn't been born brothers, then maybe I'd be happy. I thought terrible things and realized how ugly of a person I had become when engulfed in anger, which directed my fury towards myself.

It wasn't anyone's fault that I wasn't enough, whatever 'enough' meant. We threw this word around, but it was nothing but a vague concept, an ideal. I wish someone would tell me what I had to do to be 'enough.' All I knew was that I wasn't it.

Anger, which directed my fury towards myself.

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ideal. I wish someone would tell me what I had to do to be 'enough.' All I knew was that I wasn't it.

Bargaining

To cope with the pain and give me temporary relief, I painted scenarios of a parallel universe where I'd be perfect. I had never associated pain with pleasure, but with him, you could never have one without the other. If he'd give me a part of him that no one else had, I'd give him my entire being, a portion for an exchange of integrity. Stupid me.

Depression

Almost. That was what I was. Never enough, but an almost.

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Chapter 37: Acceptance

It was winter.

Ice crackled under my feet as I walked home after school. I stopped taking the bus despite the cold weather. I preferred walking thirty minutes rather than waiting at the bus stop.

"Hey, Desmond! Wait for us!"

I glanced over my shoulder and saw my friends running towards me. I smiled when they quickened their pace to join me.

"Where do you think you're going without us?" Trevor grinned, putting a brawny arm around my shoulder. "Let's go home together."

"Are you guys doing anything this Saturday?" Charlie asked as we walked down the snowy sidewalk. His nose was pink from the frost, and he looked like a small winter bunny. "Xandy's throwing a party."

"Bitch-face?" I asked, raising my brows.

"I don't know if I can make it," Scott murmured. Trevor snapped his head towards his best friend.

"What do you mean, you don't know? It's Christmas Eve! Xander said there'll be fireworks and everything. You know, pew, pew, pow! Sparkly colors everywhere!" Trevor made big gestures with his hands like an excited kid.

"Fireworks? Wow, he's going all out," I said.

"Yeah, he prepared them for Charlie," Trevor laughed. "Charlie loves anything glittery."

Charlie gave us a toothy smile. "I do like my glitters."

"So why can't you make it?" Trevor asked, turning towards Scott.

"Ben asked me to spend Christmas Eve with him," Scott said shyly. His cheeks turned pink, and it wasn't because of the chilly wind. Trevor scrunched his face.

"Ben? Your new boyfriend?"

Scott had recently started dating someone I didn't know all the details. but from what Scott told me, he seemed like a nice man. Charlie and I were

happy for him. Trevor wasn't too happy about sharing his friend with someone else.

"Why don't you invite Ben to the party? I'd love to meet him!" Charlie beamed.

"Would Xander be okay with that?" Scott asked.

"Don't worry, he won't mind."

"I mind," Trevor coughed. "I don't have a good feeling about this Ben dude."

"Why?" Scott frowned.

"His existence annoys me."

"Give him a chance."

"Chances are for losers."

Scott ignored Trevor's jealousy and turned towards me.

"You'll come to the party, right? It won't be any fun without you."

"Yeah, don't let your breakup with the Class Prince ruin Christmas," Trevor said. Scott and Charlie shot him a glare, and he blinked. "What? What did I say?"

My friends had been purposely avoiding talking about him or anything relationship related since the breakup.

"It's fine guys. I'm over it."

"Is this the part where we believe him?" Trevor whispered to Scott, who punched him in the arm. "Okay, look, we know that it's difficult getting over a breakup, and we won't ask you to talk about it if you don't want to, but you don't have to go through this alone. You can act tough all you want, but I don't believe bull. You think being silent is going to make you strong? It's not. It's going to fuck you up, that's what it's going to do."

"Trevor-"

"No, don't Trevor me. I'm going to tell Desmond what he needs to hear," he said when Scott tried to stop him. He put his hands on my shoulders. "YOU. ARE. ENOUGH," he screamed into my face, shaking me at each syllable. "Does that mean you're perfect? Fuck no. Does that mean you're worthless? Absolutely not. But you try, Desmond, and that's all that matters."

My eyes widened at his words.

"Ivan knows how special you are. I've seen the way he looked at you, the way he still looks at you. I might not know everything that happened between you two, but I know this much. If he was with you, even if it was

temporary, it was because he wanted to be with you. No one asked him to love you. Loving you was a choice. It was his choice."

He inhaled loudly before letting out a long sigh.

"Whew, glad that I finally got that off my chest."

I looked at my friends and felt like the saddest but luckiest boy in the world.

"We might need a fake ID if we're going to buy beer for the party," I murmured. They blinked in surprise, but their lips pulled into wide smiles.

"Scott will take care of the ID, you and I can buy the drinks, and Charlie can stand beside us and look pretty. We're back in business, boys!" Trevor cheered, pulling us together with his brotherly smile.

Chapter 38: The Confession

We walked up to Xander's porch and knocked on the door. It opened and standing in front of us was Xander. He was wearing a bold, red sweater with the word 'Xaddy' knitted in green.

"Well, someone is in the holiday spirits," Trevor snickered, doing a quick handshake with him. "Charlie?"

"Charlie," Xander mumbled sheepishly. He noticed me, and I glared back.

"Come on, it's Christmas Eve. Can't you two try to get along for one night?" Trevor whined. He pushed me forward and Xander retreated as if I was contaminated by an incurable disease.

"Merry Christmas," I said to Xander, plastering a fake smile on my face. I walked past him and muttered, "Bitch."

Trevor stopped him before he could land a punch, and I could hear them squabbling behind me. I wandered around Xander's house, admiring the bright, glittery decorations and the 14-foot Christmas tree. People dressed in red, white, and green were smiling, laughing, and singing. Everyone looked like they were enjoying the party in high holiday spirits. I felt like the Grinch: cold, bitter, and sad. I tried to have fun, but my mind kept drifting elsewhere, thinking about he-who-shall-not-be-named. He wouldn't be here, right? Maybe Christmas miracles came true, and he'd get run over by a car.

I couldn't focus on the conversation my friends were having and left to get myself a drink. I accidentally bumped into someone and staggered back. When I raised my gaze, I froze. Ivan's grey eyes blinked at me, looking just as surprised. My lips parted to say something, but nothing came out.

"Desmond," he murmured. I roughly pushed past him. I didn't want to hear his voice. I didn't want to hear him say my name. I didn't want to hear him say anything. I frantically looked around me and felt relieved when I saw Charlie stuffing his face with cake in the kitchen.

"Charlie!" I exclaimed, quickly joining him.

"Hey, Desy," he beamed, his lips coated with icing. "Here, have some cake."

I could see Ivan walk towards us from the corner of my eye, and I panicked.

"Thanks, but I'll pass. Do you know where the bathroom is?"

"The bathroom?" he repeated, licking his lips. He scrunched his face, pretending to be deep in thought. Meanwhile, Ivan was getting closer.

"Charlie, you live here. How do you not know where the bathroom is?!"

"Don't yell at me, Desy, I can't think straight if you do." He frowned. Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fingers against his temples, thinking hard. "Hm, the bathroom..."

I was getting the feeling that he was stalling time on purpose.

"Forget it, I'll find it myself. But can you do me a favor and distract Ivan?"

"Ivan?" Charlie opened his eyes and looked over my shoulder. "Oh, look! Ivan is here!"

The blood from my face drained down my neck. "No, Charlie, don't-"

"Ivan! Hey, Ivan!" Charlie exclaimed, jumping up and down while flailing his hand at him. "Come have some cake!"

My jaw dropped at his betrayal. Before I could run away, Ivan had already joined us.

"Merry Christmas!" Charlie cheered with that wide smile of his. I gave him a desperate look, begging him with my eyes to make Ivan leave. Charlie looked at me and frowned. "Why are you staring at me like that? I feel attacked."

I mentally groaned.

"Merry Christmas, Charlie," Ivan murmured. His deep, soft voice triggered memories that worsened the pain in my chest. "Do you mind if I talk with Desmond alone for a sec?"

I used every eye-communication skill I had, narrowing them, squinting them, widening them, giving Charlie the 'don't you dare' look. Charlie looked at me with pursed lips and gave me a small nod. I mentally sighed in relief.

"He's all yours!" Charlie beamed. My mouth fell wide open when he skipped away, leaving me alone with Ivan.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"I have to go."

I tried to brush past him, but he caught my hand. The familiar shape of his hand that wrapped around mine and the unmistakable warmth of his

skin sent a jolt through my arm.

"Desmond-"

And that was when I lost it.

"No!" I turned towards him. "I won't let you slither your way back into my life after you deceived me! I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore. Why can't you understand that?"

"Hear me out, Des."

It felt rotten hearing my name in his voice.

"Don't call me that! You, out of all people, have no right to say my beautiful name in that twisted mouth of yours. We're not friends. We're not together. You're a nobody to me!"

I tried to push him away, but he stood his ground.

"Let go," I ordered.

"Not until you listen to what I have to say," he said.

"Go find your oh, beloved Arthur, why don't you?" I yanked my hand out of his grip and shoved past him. He didn't grab me or run after me. Instead, he said, "Desmond, will you please stay and listen?"

My mind said 'no, fuck you' but my body halted. I tried to move my legs, but they refused. I turned towards him with tightened fists.

"What do you want from me? You've already ruined me, what more do you want?"

"Desmond, I'm sorry."

I laughed coldly, shaking my head in disbelief.

"You are an extremely stupid boy if you think I'm going to forgive you. You're sorry? Sorry for what? Sorry for making me believe that you cared about me or sorry for forgetting to mention that you were in love with my brother?" I demanded. "I bet it was fun for you. I bet you were laughing inside when you kissed me, when you manipulated me into thinking your feelings were genuine, it was all fun and games to you, wasn't it? Well, I'm done. I'm done being toyed around with, I'm done being lied to, and I'm done being with you!"

"I wasn't playing with your feelings. You want to know why I didn't tell you about my past with Arthur? Because of this. Because I knew you'd let your insecurities blind you to think the only reason I was with you was for Arthur."

I ignored him and walked away, but this time he followed me.

"Arthur never asked me to kiss you, he never asked me to like you, and he never asked me to love you. Damn it, Desmond, will you stop and listen to me?"

"No."

Ivan caught my wrist and spun me around. I had no other choice but to look him in the eyes. Even after everything he had done to me, my heart still raced inside my chest whenever my gaze met his. My heart was pounding so hard, my ribs like they were going to crack. I felt

"He asked me to keep you out of trouble, that's it!"

"And you agreed because you have feelings for him."

"Had, Desmond, I had feelings for him. It was all in the past. I meant it when I said that he and I were nothing but history. He was there for me when I had no one. Even if you can't understand that, he was all I had, and that's something that neither you nor I can ever change. But falling in love with you? That has nothing to do with him."

"You've never felt a thing for me," I hissed. His eyes hardened.

"Don't say that. I was wrong for keeping the truth from you, but don't you dare tell me that my feelings for you aren't real."

"I was a replacement. Just admit it, you missed my brother and decided to take the younger one."

"How could you be a replacement when you two are so different? You're nothing like him. The way you act, the way you think, the way you speak, everything, but despite it all, I fell in love with you. I like how you blush whenever you're flustered, how your voice quickens when you're excited, how your eyes brighten when you're happy, how you stand up for yourself and don't take shit from anyone, how you can be stubborn sometimes. Yeah, that's right, I even like how frustratingly stubborn you are! You're so stubborn that you pick fights with people you can't win against. What kind of idiot does that?!"

He cupped my face in his hands, looking deeply into my eyes. For once, it wasn't his eyes that enthralled me, but the way he looked at me. He looked at me as if I was the only person walking on this planet. It was a terribly genuine look that chased away the terribly loud doubts, leaving me with nothing but the truth that dwelled in his very real eyes.

"Only you, that's who." His voice fell to a gentle whisper. "Only Desmond fucking Mellow."

I felt my face burn crimson red when he said my name.

"I loved Arthur because I was lonely. It was nothing but timing and circumstances. I was in a dark place and needed someone. But you? I fell in love with you. And I'm sorry for hurting you. I kept a secret because I was afraid of losing you. It was selfish and wrong of me, and I'm sorry."

Ivan took in a deep breath, his gaze never leaving mine.

"You don't have to forgive me." He bit his lower lip and shook his head as if to regret his words immediately. "No Desmond, forgive me. You can call me a twat-faced bimbo, scream at me and shout every insult that comes to mind, so forgive me. Will you do that? Please?"

His forehead pressed against mine.

"Gosh, if you weren't so mad at me, I'd kiss you, and hell knows that I wouldn't be able to stop."

I flinched, reddening immediately. That was Ivan Moonrich for you, charming, arrogant, and so damn full of himself. I hated him. I loved him. I hated that I loved him.

"Forgive me, Des," he whispered, his voice desperate.

"You're impossible," I said.

"I know."

"And I hate you."

He smiled, seeing past my lie. He always did.

"I know," he murmured. He leaned forward, and the moment our lips touched, everything felt right. As our lips moved in perfect sync, we heard fireworks burst from afar, but we were already lost in our own world of splashing colors and sparks.

Chapter 39: A Surprise Visit

A few weeks had passed since that night. I slept in Ivan's bed, and when I woke up, I went to the kitchen to make us breakfast. Ivan came in and suddenly hoisted me onto the counter, wrapping his arms around my torso. He rested his forehead against my chest, hiding the expression of his face.

"Ivan?" I whispered, wondering if he was okay.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," he murmured, nuzzling his nose against me. The warmth of his body heat almost made me forget that it was winter. I rolled my eyes at his childish demand but secretly wished the same.

"You're so silly," I whispered with a smile, planting a gentle kiss on his head.

Keys jingled outside the front door and we pulled away from each other. Ivan looked just as confused as I was because no one else had the keys to his house except him, and he wasn't expecting any visitors. The doorknob twisted, and the door opened. A cold gust of air invaded the house. My lips parted and my eyes widened in shock as I gaped at the person standing at the front door. I thought it was my imagination, but no matter how many times I blinked, he was still there.

"Arthur?" I croaked.

My brother pulled his luggage to his side and removed his hat, greeting us with a wide smile.

"I'm back."

To be continued...

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